White Rain

By: Zapenstap

A woman arrives in Konoha with children she claims are Itachi's. Sasuke struggles with suspicion. Sakura struggles with Sasuke. As Hokage, Naruto must decide the future of the village. OCs! Developed. Over 1000 reviews! WHOOOO!

Status: complete

Published: 2008-05-05

Updated: 2015-04-27

Words: 340722

Chapters: 27

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Drama/Family - Characters: Naruto U., Sasuke U., Sakura H., Itachi U. - Reviews: 1,771 - Favs: 1,664 - Follows: 1,363

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4237746/1/White-Rain

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

White Rain

Introduction
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26

The End

Chapter 1

A/N : This is a Naruto fanfic, though the first chapter may not seem like it because the introduction chapter **focuses on original characters** . The Itachi of Chapter One is NOT Itachi Uchiha. You are challenged to read all the way through chapter one (or even just halfway) **before dismissing it on this fact.** It's a tough sell (I'm aware) but I write professionally. These aren't Sues.

Warnings : This fanfic is for 16+ readers (rated M). It contains sexual references , mature themes (including sado-masochism...described vaguely but not "shown"), some violence, a very little bit of swearing, and other material. , This fic FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES for this site so please do not report it as MA. There are no explicit sex scenes. All such scenes "cut off" before anything happens. Violence is typical for a story about ninjas. There isn't anything extremely disturbing described in any detail.

Notes : White Rain does NOT take place in an AU (alternate universe). It starts off in a different country, but in the same world as Naruto-verse, just a great distance away, and roughly ten years after the projected end of the manga (i.e Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura and Co are roughly in their mid-twenties). The majority of the story will take place in Konoha.

White Rain follows a prequel/pilot I wrote previously called To Sleep With Demons , featuring Itachi Uchiha that explains part of the back history of this story. It's not necessary to read the prequel. Relevant information will be integrated.

Chapters are long and get longer and longer.

I LOVE reviews. Please review.

Disclaimer : I own my original characters. I don't own the characters, world, or concepts of Kishimoto and associated entities. I

am not compensated in any way for this story (except by reviews)

White Rain

Chapter One: The Black Vase

By Zapenstap

"Rina! Watch this!"

Itachi stood at the edge of the precipice, waiting as his sister scrambled to the top of the ridge behind him. She scrubbed dirt from her cheek and dusted off her skirts. When she straightened, her round black eyes took in the drop from the cliff in front of his toes. Her mouth formed a little round "O," but she didn't say anything.

"I'm going to tie a rope to this tree," Itachi said, patting the bark where he had already secured the knot, "and then swing down the sheer face, all the way to the bottom."

"You have enough rope," Rina said. Despite the hitch in her voice, it wasn't quite a question. Her eyes studied the cliff, but she didn't try to discourage him. She was used to his stunts by now. "How are you going to get back up?"

Always the practical thinker. He grinned. She didn't care about the answer. She asked because she wouldn't go down with him, not by swinging on a rope anyway. She would find a way to walk around if he asked her to join him.

He looked down the cliff. It was only about a hundred feet or so, just a drop in the woods, with trees standing tall all around and a mixture of bracken and brambles obscuring the ground below. "I think I can climb it," he said. "Hold my stuff?"

She took his school backpack and settled down next to the tree where he had tied the rope. She made a jumbled pillow out of their

mutual belongings and watched as Itachi backed himself to the edge of the cliff and tested the rope. He hoped it would hold his weight.

"Here I go!"

He leapt.

At first, the feeling was that of being airborne. His body flew through nothing, wind whistling in his ears. Then he came swinging back. He held his feet out, expecting to push his body away from the cliff face with his legs and propel himself downward, but at the last second the rope twisted. His body slammed into the rocks, most of the impact absorbed by his left shoulder.

Grunting, he tightened his grip on the rope, scrambling for purchase against the rock wall until the rope stopped spinning. Then he lowered himself down hand over hand. Halfway down, his hands and arms began to ache. When he got close to the ground he realized that Rina was right—the rope wasn't quite long enough. A quick assessment assured him that it wasn't far to jump, though. He pushed away from the cliff face with his feet and let go, falling through the free air about ten feet until he hit the ground on the balls of his feet and pitched forward, tumbling head over heels into the bracken.

"You okay?" Rina called down. He looked up to see her round face peering down at him, large dark eyes framed by straight, jet-black hair.

"Yeah," he said. It was mostly true.

Rina was very patient as he painfully climbed his way back up. It took him three tries on three different routes. When he finally made his way back to the top of the ridge, his sister was reading from her schoolbooks. He sat down next to her, panting, and rooted around in his bag for leftovers from lunch. He shared the cookies he found with his sister. She smiled at him happily, and ate all of them without speaking.

Itachi sprawled out on his back and stared at the sky. He watched clouds crawl across the blue canopy and tried to make them look like things: animals, plants, objects, but the scene failed to distract him. The pictures in his mind of real things were stronger, and it wasn't long before he was restless.

"Think it's safe to go home yet?" he asked. The question was directed at Rina, but he kept his eyes on the sky. They wouldn't last long on cookie crumbs. Rina would get cranky if she didn't eat, and he didn't have enough money to buy them dinner.

Rina didn't answer his question. He didn't really expect her to. She didn't like talking about problems, especially if they upset her and weren't the kind of problems that could be solved with a little thought and a decision.

They had been out a couple of hours now.

When Itachi had picked Rina up from Conservatory after school, they had walked home together like usual only to see the black vase in the second floor window—their mother's bedroom window. The vase was a large clunky thing made of marble.

Itachi had taken Rina's hand while he stared at it, trying to decide what to do.

Stay away. Don't come home.

That was what the vase meant. Itachi's mother had coached him repeatedly on the message over the years, and he made sure that Rina understood it too. Always check the windows. Never enter the house before checking the windows, and if any of the regular furniture was moved around—ANY of it, but especially that ugly black vase—don't come home.

So Itachi led Rina away. It had happened a lot recently, day after day most days of the week. Sometimes they went shopping (if they had any money), or wandered the city's neighborhoods together, but

today they took some rope from the backyard shed and went adventuring in the woods. It was just a little forest area—part of the city park actually—but empty most of the time, which made it perfect. Itachi had discovered it on accident one day. It was a new thrill, like roof walking last week, or bridge jumping and cliff diving had been last month, and rock climbing the month before that.

Ever since he turned eleven it was one thing after another. He blamed the hormones, but he couldn't deny that he seemed to save his craziest stunts for when the vase was in the window. He had to keep occupied during those hours so he wouldn't think about the vase, his mother, his father, or what was happening at home. He found that the best way to keep occupied was to feel too excited, too pained, or too scared to think. His arm ached now. He welcomed the throb, the sting, and the itches from the brambles. It was a distraction.

"I'll bet it's okay," he decided aloud after awhile. He couldn't see the bright ball of the sun in the sky anymore. It must have dipped below the mountains. It would be dark soon. They had to go home eventually.

Rina put her book away and got to her feet. She waited for him expectantly. Once he was up and moving, she followed him.

"Do you think mom will find out what you did at school today?" Rina asked him.

Itachi took a deep breath. "Probably. I don't know."

They didn't talk about that either. It was unspoken knowledge that they shared and the silence was beneficial for them both. He could sense Rina thinking about it, though. She had egged him on. She wouldn't want their mother to find out about that, so it was in her best interest if neither of them got caught, though he didn't think she'd betray him anyway—not for this.

"What will you do if she asks?"

"I don't know."

The shadows were long in the streets as they approached the expansive manor house with its white shuttered windows, the black gate, and its elegant gray stone walls. It was a fine house among other fine houses on the highest hill with the best view. If not for its associations and secrets, he would have been fonder of the residence—proud even. Itachi opened the gate and let Rina through first. He followed behind.

"Do you think he's gone?" Rina whispered as they approached the porch.

"Maybe he went out," Itachi said. The vase was no longer in the window, but he was quiet opening the front door anyway. The absence of the vase didn't mean they were alone. It just meant it was safe enough, that whatever his mother didn't want them to see was over.

But Itachi would notice new bruises. He knew it, as surely as he knew that he would see the strain in his mother's eyes. He just wouldn't say anything, especially not at dinner, and never indicate he was any wiser in his father's presence. His mother wouldn't say anything either. Neither would Rina, except in quiet whispers to him when the house was dark, everybody else was asleep, and she crept into his room because she was scared. Otherwise, in daylight, they would all just pretend that nothing was the matter.

But maybe Rina was right. Maybe Gehard wouldn't be there. He often went out, even when he was in town. Itachi knew it was strange to wish his father wasn't ever around. Some days he found himself thinking that it would be best if Gehard would go on one of his business trips and never come home. It didn't even feel painful to think it. There was a time he had wished differently, but since the first time he had seen the bruises and was old enough to understand what they meant, it just wasn't so.

He had never called the man dad, even when he thought of him as his father. His mother had never called him that either. It was always "Gehard this" and "Gehard that." Only rarely would his mother refer to her husband as "your father," and then it was usually only when he was around to hear it and they were discussing something formal like where to send Itachi for prep school.

Itachi and Rina removed their shoes when they entered the house and parted ways to carry their book bags to their rooms. Itachi tossed his on the bed next to his guitar, which he had left out this morning after practicing before school. He hadn't made much progress, which frustrated him. He had heard that music was like math, and he was good at math, but he didn't find guitar as easy as adding up numbers in his head. It disappointed Rina. After her piano and singing audition earned her a place in the Conservatory's Young Talent Competition, she had wanted him to play guitar with her for her first time on a real stage. He wasn't good enough, but he didn't know how to tell her so.

"Itachi?"

It was his mother's voice calling—firmly. He closed his bedroom door and walked back along the hallway toward the formal dining room. Rina was already seated at the table with a tall glass of orange juice at her elbow. She watched him enter with her dark round eyes slightly wider than usual. He could read the warning in her expression and hesitated in the doorway.

"Your principal called," his mother said.

She stood at the head of the table, pouring a second glass of orange juice—presumably for him. That was his second clue that something was wrong, next to her tone. His mother didn't usually prepare food. They had hired help for that. Itachi realized then that he hadn't seen any of the usual people; maybe his mother or Gehard had sent them all home early. Of course, she might just have nervous energy. Maybe she wanted to serve him herself.

She didn't look nervous. Of course, that was not much to judge by. Looking at Itachi's mother was like studying a painting, even when she was angry. Physically, she looked like his sister, flawless ivory skin, dark brown hair with just a hint of curl, and large, luminous dark eyes. But it wasn't her beauty that people noticed. Regal elegance embodied every inch of her. The way she moved, the way she dressed, the way the light caught the angles of her face: it was as if she was made from fine oils. Not that Itachi was fooled. He knew all her moods, had witnessed her cold anger, and her passionate fury, knew about all the secrets she hid behind silk brocade, lavender soap, social charm and general gaiety. She was a complicated woman, his mother. Right now she was making *him* nervous.

It was too late to dodge the conversation. She had seen him, addressed the topic, and beckoned him in. He walked slowly forward, and sat down at the dining room table across from his sister. Rina sucked her lips into her mouth. The look she was giving him said it all. She wasn't *planning* to tattle, but she also hoped she wasn't asked because between him and their mother, her loyalties were divided.

Itachi swallowed. He tried to be light. "What did he call about? My grades?"

"Your grades are fine," his mother snapped. "Don't try to play me. You know better. You got in a fight with another boy today."

Itachi's clenched his hands into fists. They shook on his lap under the table. His mother's dark eyes were like agate stones, hard anger boiled into pinpricks that were trying to bore through him.

"You are not violent," she said. It almost sounded like a prayer. "Tell me you did not hit him first."

Now he was even more ashamed. He stole a glance at Rina. She looked spooked, frozen in her chair like a furtive night creature caught suddenly in the light.

His mother followed his gaze and bore into his sister. "Rina, you were there, weren't you? What happened? Did your bother start a fight?"

Rina squeaked.

Itachi felt some chagrin on Rina's account. Caught between them, she didn't know what to do. "It's okay," he said. "She's going to find out anyway."

Rina turned her head to their mother. "He said something *bad* ."

"Who did? Itachi?"

"Jered Lassen."

His mother rounded on him. "Is that the boy you fought? What did you do to him?"

Itachi shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing mu-"

"Punched him," Rina said. "Right in the eye." She demonstrated at the air in front of her. She was smiling too. It took a moment for Itachi to realize that she was proud.

His mother's face didn't look quite so amused. "This is not how I raised you. What did he say?"

Itachi wanted to bolt out of the room, but quick deliberation concluded that that would just be more trouble. Even if she didn't follow, or if he escaped the house somehow, he'd have to come home and face her eventually, and then she'd really lay into him. Best to mitigate. "Nothing," he said with a shrug. "It was a stupid comment and just set me off. I'll apologize to him tomorrow."

"Oh, you surely will. And to his parents. And the principal…" His mother's tone was matter-of-fact, but there was an edge to it. Itachi carefully avoided looking at her. Her tone was clipped. He could feel her anger, tightly controlled, the way she controlled every emotion

she had. "But that is not what I asked. I want to know why you thought violence was necessary. What did he say? It must have been something more than stupid for you to hit him in front of everybody."

She was right, but admitting it would require more explanation. It happened right in the middle of the schoolyard, at lunch, in front of pretty much everybody. He wanted to tell her, he had wanted to say a lot of things to her for a long time, but he didn't know how to say it. It would bring up too many hidden things, thoughts, feelings, that cacophony of noise that had exploded from him just prior to when his fist collided Jered's face.

Not that he was sorry. Jered Lassen was a rude, stuck-up kid, like a lot of the kids he went to school with. It was the best school in the county, his mother said, and a lot of the kids in his class seemed to think so too, and that they were pretty special for being there.

But that wasn't why Itachi had punched him.

It wasn't that he felt an outcast. Itachi was special too. The other kids knew his position. Everyone did. He was bright, at the top of most of his classes, but more importantly, he was *her* son.

The exact amount of the family fortune was a secret—even Itachi didn't know the figures—but the Van Alstyne family, his mother's family, was very well known. Itachi didn't have the Van Alstyne last name—he had his father's—but he *was* a direct heir, and that made a lot of difference as to "who he was" in society, what was expected of him, and what he was entitled to.

But that wasn't why he had punched Jered either.

"I won't hit him again," Itachi said, still avoiding his mother's sharp, attentive eyes. If he faced her, he feared she would read his soul. He fancied she could see through brick walls. She was very adept at reading people, of seeing right through the facades that everyone in

her society seemed to wear like cloaks, and that went double for her own children.

"Why did you hit him?" she demanded again. She wasn't going to give it up.

"He said something rude."

"What did he say?" Clenched jaw. She would hold like a badger.

"I *had* to hit him for it." And that was the truth.

"What was it? Something about you?"

"No."

"About your sister?"

"No." He would have really clocked him for that.

"Your father?"

He held back a scoff, and by her face, she knew exactly why. He suspected she had only thrown that in to avoid the obvious conclusion.

"Me?"

He didn't reply. The effort of not speaking was enough to make his jaw ache.

"So it was about me," his mother concluded. Her voice sounded distant, but a moment later she was putting the heat on him again. He stubbornly refused to look at her. "Itachi, I'm not going to get angry. I don't care what this boy said. I just want to know why you felt it was necessary to hit him. Tell me what he said."

He understood that it was not her vanity that made her ask—though she *was* vain—and he knew that he was not going to get out of this

conversation until he told her, but the words wouldn't come. He couldn't repeat them, not to her face. He had been holding them back far too long.

"He called you a whore," Rina said from across the table, and took a sip of orange juice.

Itachi's mother turned to his sister slowly. Itachi was shocked, but simultaneously relieved to have the pressure turned away from him. He was pretty sure that Rina knew what the word meant. It was a term whispered about in fascination, sometimes in gruesome detail, by school kids his age, but sometimes younger. There had been gruesome details whispered about his mother too, but the things Jered Lassen said weren't whispered; they were shouted out loud to everybody, with that wagging tongue and clownish face that seemed to think it was all a great joke.

Rina continued. "Lassen *also* said that Itachi is a whoreson and a bastard, and that he shouldn't get the family money. Then he said *you* deserve to get beat. That's when Itachi hit him."

Itachi forced himself to look up. His mother's face was pale. She was a pale woman by nature, but he had never seen her look so ghostly. Her hands reached for the back of Itachi's chair. Her body appeared to tremble beneath her dress.

"I'm not sorry I hit him," Itachi confessed. He didn't know what else to say. He wasn't sorry, but he didn't feel righteous about it either. For one thing, he wasn't all together sure about the truth of the things Jered had said about his mother. He was sure Jered had just repeated something he had heard—probably something his father had told him. A lot of it was false. His mother wasn't a whore—that was ridiculous—but there was too much plausibility regarding his mother's unfaithfulness to Gehard that he wasn't certain it was a lie either. There was a dankness of truth about the rumors that smothered righteous indignation like a funeral cloth. Whatever the truth, he knew it was black and ugly, as black and ugly as the bruises on her arms.

He also knew that it wasn't simple, that it involved adult concepts he understood but did not quite comprehend. In his heart he believed—really believed—that if the truth was gruesome, if *she* was gruesome, it was in a different way than everybody thought.

And it made him angry. It had for years. He was angry at Jered for talking about what should never be spoken of, and at himself for not being able to speak of it to *her* , but more than that he was angry at his mother, whom he loved terribly, for making him think anything wrong about her. He wanted to rage, to shout at her, but looking at her, it was not anger that stirred him to speak.

The expression on his mother's face was ghastly. It frightened him more than the rumors about her angered him. His instinct more than anything else was to protect her, to shield her from harm, but he didn't know how, he had never known how, and maybe that was what angered him most.

"I hate him," he said vehemently, bitterly.

"Who?" His mother asked

"Gehard," Rina supplied. She could read his mind. Or maybe they were just thinking the same thing.

"I hate Gehard," Itachi confirmed.

At this confession, this sinful confession, he thought his mother would say "don't say such things about your father," but she didn't say anything. She was staring into space, seeing nothing. No. She was staring at the flight of stairs that led to the second floor, where Itachi assumed Gehard must be.

"Mom?" He began to feel nervous. "Where is he? What is he doing?"

"He's on the phone," she said. There was a moment of silence where he could see her brow knitting in thought, her expression pensive, and then it was if some unseen force had seized and shook her until

she rattled. "With the Lassens." She turned on her heel and half pushed Itachi out of his chair. "Get out of the house. Take your sister. Go to your Aunt Cecile's."

He stumbled out of his chair and away from the table. "What? Why?"

"Because he knows. Jered Lassen's father is Rabar Lassen. He owes Gehard money, and I know for a fact he can't pay. Not with gold, but he does have information. He won't hold back. You can't be here when he puts it together. You need to go quickly. Rina, where are your shoes?"

Rina tilted her head to one side like an owl. She turned luminescent eyes to Itachi, questioning his mother's directive, asking him for confirmation.

"Go put your shoes on," he said to her. As Rina hopped off her chair and ran on bare feet to her room, Itachi turned back to his mother. "I don't understand."

"You don't need to. Just hurry!"

"I don't like not understanding! I'm not a child. What is he going to do? If he hurts you, I won't leave."

"Don't be stupid. You *are* a child. You can't stop him. Take care of your sister. I don't want you to…"

"Lucia!"

The voice boomed down at them from the top of the stairs.

Itachi felt sweat break out on his face. He couldn't move now. He couldn't abandon his mother to the treachery of that voice.

"Go," she hissed at him.

He shook his head mutely.

Gehard descended the stairs in slow, calculated strides.

All Itachi ever saw when he looked at Gehard was darkness: jet black hair shadowing dark eyes that were close to black, almost as dark as Itachi's own. There were always circles under his father's eyes, from heavy drinking, chain smoking, gambling, late hours, and a varied assortment of narcotics. Gehard wasn't a mess, though. He was an intellectual drunk, an aggressive philanderer, a heavy gambler, and it was rumored that he could lay a man out in two moves or less. There were whispers that he had killed—more than once—over debts in barrooms. He was a ruthless and wildly successful businessman, and there was no denying that what he liked most in the world—except perhaps for women—was money, and violence.

Though he was not heavy, not even a little, Gehard leaned on the rails as he descended the stairs, as if too lazy to support his own body weight. His muscles were well defined and visible though his tank top. He slouched as he walked toward them, shoulders hunched forward. He wore a pair of shapeless gray sweatpants. He was also barefoot.

Only his family ever saw Gehard Barculo this way. Most people saw him suave, well dressed, confident, and gorgeous. To everyone else he grinned, adoring the attention, and told witty jokes at the expense of those who could not hear them. He charmed his way through conversation, into exclusive parties, and out of trouble with the law. It was only here, in the home after countless hours of impressing people, alone with his wife and children, that the real Gehard allowed his inner beast to sprawl.

That was what Itachi thought his mother didn't want them to see. It was in these moods of his—these brooding moods of cold anger and dark desire—that she put the black vase in the window.

"Lucia," he said again, this time with deceptive mildness that frightened Itachi more than the bellow had a moment ago. He was sober enough to be coy and hide the extent of his anger. His mother

took a step back and sideways, half-shielding Itachi with her body. Her face was set like stone.

"What do you need?" she asked coolly, following him with her eyes. "Wait upstairs and I will bring it to you."

He regarded her silently for a moment, and then smiled. "I was just on the phone," he said. "Do we have any bourbon?"

"We do. Upstairs."

He looked at her again, pointedly. "Upstairs?"

"That's right."

"Away from the kids?" he asked, his mouth laughing, but his eyes hard as rocks.

"If you please."

He turned his smile on Itachi. The smile was so disarming that Itachi almost believed he meant it, just enough to relax a fraction, and in that instant Gehard had closed the space between Itachi and his mother. His long legs carried him across the dining room in two strides. Before Itachi could so much as yell, Gehard had grabbed his mother's arm and wrenched her violently toward him. He spun her about, wrapping an arm around her throat and drug the back of her body close against him as he stepped backward away from Itachi.

"There now," he said in her ear. "We're all together. No secrets. He's right there. See him?"

Itachi stood frozen to the floor, rooted to the spot. Gehard was glaring at him over his mother's shoulder. His mother's face was miraculously still composed, though she grasped the forearm crushing her throat with her nails. She was looking at Itachi too, and he realized in an instant that her composure was for him. Gehard watched Itachi for a moment or two, and then kissed his mother's

cheek through her hair. It was haunting, almost disgusting, the way he did it. Itachi's blood felt hot in his veins. There was a rushing in his head. But he couldn't move.

"She's mine, you know," he said, to Itachi this time. "Won her fair, didn't I? She chose me."

Itachi felt his body trembling where he stood, though whether with rage or fear he wasn't sure. He couldn't speak. Gehard's words were like white noise in his ears, vapid and meaningless. All he could soak in was the baleful, jealous look in his father's eyes—half crazed, half dangerously sane—as the man kissed his mother more tenderly, more hauntingly, while crushing her throat beneath his arm.

Itachi had imagined what it was like, Gehard's behavior with his mother, but he had never seen it before. His imagination couldn't prepare him for it. He couldn't process it. What he was witnessing was too complicated, too animalistic, too far beyond his sensibilities and experience. All he knew was that it was not right.

"Let her go," he said. His voice sounded weak. He had never heard himself sound weak before. "Please." Why did he say that? He should have said something else. He knew it the second the word escaped his lips.

"Why should I?" Gehard's face was laughing at him, clownish, cocky, like Jered's had been, only Gehard was not a stupid child. Gehard was doing it on purpose. He was waiting for Itachi to throw a punch. Waiting for it like a salivating dog.

Itachi's body trembled from not moving. "She's my mother. She's your wife. We're your kids. Be kind."

Gehard chuckled. It was a sharp, mechanical sound, like metal gears grating over rain and rust. "I don't think so."

"She can't breathe!"

Gehard laughed. "She likes it. Don't you, you cold bitch? You like it."

He pulled his arm in tighter. Itachi saw his mother's composure break, though whether because of the words or because she was in pain or unable to draw breath he wasn't sure. Either way, she struggled, digging her nails into Gehard's arm. His mouth twisted. She must have done something, dug an elbow in to his gut perhaps, because Gehard grabbed her hair with his free hand and wrenched her head back until she could only stare at the ceiling.

"Are they mine?" he demanded, yelling into her ear. "Are they? Either one?"

Itachi's mother didn't answer. She continued to claw at his arm. Itachi was almost certain now that she couldn't breathe.

"I'll get it out of you," he snarled. "I'll find out." He laughed again. The switch between rage and amusement made Itachi's skin crawl. "You filthy whore. I always wondered. You must not get it. I thought I made it clear. Didn't I? I swear to God, woman." He looked meaningfully at Itachi and shook his mother's head by her hair. "You had better hope at least one of them is mine. Because if they aren't, I don't need them. Do you understand that?" He shook her. "DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

At that moment, Itachi heard a sound, a shuffle of shoes on wooden floorboards. "Rina!" he shouted. "Don't come in here!"

But it was too late.

Rina, with shoes on both feet, a ribbon in her hair, and a light purple cardigan sweater buttoned over her front, walked into the living room. She stopped cold in the entryway, mouth agape and eyes wide open. Itachi watched the dreamy expression in her face disintegrate into mindless panic.

"Mama!" she screamed, and flung her small body at Gehard. "MAMA!" She reached up to tear at his arm, her little hands batting

ineffectively at the muscles that gripped her mother by the hair and throat. Tears streamed down her face as she clawed at Gehard's fingers.

Gehard barely even took note of her. He saw her fly at him and released his mother's throat to back swing at Rina's face like he was playing tennis. The collision of his forearm against her head fell deaf on Itachi's ears. He saw Rina collapse like an empty sack, tripping over her skirts to smash her face into the hard wood floors. He heard nothing. For a moment there was silence, and then tears erupted from his sister's throat, wails of pain and fear that hammered into Itachi's skull and broke through numb disbelief. Blood streamed from his little sister's forehead where she had split the skin on the floorboards. Gehard's free arm dangled above his sister's prone body. His mother was shouting, trying to twist free of the grip Gehard had on her hair.

"Shut up!" Gehard was screaming at his mother. "I said shut up! Look what you made me do!" He reached down and lifted Rina to her knees by the back of her dress and looked into her face. She stopped sobbing, thrashing in his grip with little whimpers of fear, and cried Itachi's name.

"Who does she belong to?" Gehard demanded, this time at Itachi's mother. "I swear to God, Lucia, you had better hope he is well protected." He looked at Rina's tear-streaked face. Her ribbon lay crumpled on the floor, her hair a mess around her eyes, her chin wobbling, jaw set, blood dripping down the bridge of her nose. "She's a beauty, isn't she? Even banged up, she's a beauty, more so than you someday, I think. And so talented. God, I thought she was mine..."

Itachi launched himself at Gehard. "Let her go!" He was stronger than Rina, much stronger, and he threw everything he had into his fists. His teachers always said he was a spry kid—energetic, powerful, and quick of mind and body. They were always asking him to slow down and be careful. His coaches found him adept, strong, and aggressive; they urged him on. He spent much of his free time

active. He could beat down most the kids in his class with sheer force of energy.

Gehard made him feel like a clumsy kitten. His fists flailed against nothing, emptiness, as Gehard's knee slammed up into his chest. The air left his lungs, sucked out of his body so hard he couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't feel anything but aching and burning pain in the empty cavity of his chest. His knees hit the floorboards and he fell forward onto his hands, unable to gasp, pant, cry, or speak. It was terrifying, dizzying, nauseating. And then Gehard's leg came down on his back. He sprawled flat, choked and broken, unable even to roll away to avoid a third blow.

"Don't!"

His mother's voice, frantic, but forceful.

"Gehard. Don't! Whatever you heard, it's a lie! They are yours. They are yours!"

The sensation of threat and endangerment vanished as quickly as it had overwhelmed him. The whisper of his mother's skirts rushed into Itachi's ears. He could feel her hands on the back of his neck, cool and gentle, soft as the lavender soap that he associated as her fragrance. Itachi turned his head to look at her, to let her know that he was all right, that the air was returning to his lungs and that in a moment he would rise.

He barely caught sight of her dark hair as she knelt before Gehard's bare foot landed between them. His mother straightened her back as Gehard pulled her up by the shoulder and grabbed her face. Seizing her jaw in one hand and fistful of hair in the other, he applied pressure and pulled until she rose on tiptoe and cried out in pain.

Then he cuffed her across the face.

"Get on your knees," he said. "Get on your knees, you lying bitch." He said it very calmly, like a man addressing a trained animal. To

Itachi's horror, his mother dropped to her knees on command. Itachi shut his eyes and tried to lie still. "There's a girl," he heard Gehard say. "That's good."

His mother didn't speak.

"Now. Say it again. Are they mine?"

"Yes."

"Both of them?"

"Certainly."

Gehard chuckled. "They do look like me," he admitted. "You thought very carefully about that didn't you? You lying whore. So clever. I am sorry it had to come to this. I don't like it, what you are forcing me to do. You're such a liar."

Itachi's mother's face tightened. She didn't answer.

Her silence seemed to have an effect. Gehard looked at Rina, his expression considering.

"Rina?" Gehard called out. "Rina, sweetie, are you okay? I didn't mean to knock you down, princess. Don't get in my way next time. Mama made me angry."

Rina didn't answer, not so much as a murmur.

"Doesn't know, does she?" Gehard spat, this time addressing Itachi's mother. "How have you been raising them to think of me? What have you been telling them? You manipulative little bitch. It's all going to change now. From today on, it's going to be different. Right?"

"Yes."

"You will obey me in this?"

"Yes."

He slapped her face so hard the sound echoed in the hallway. "Yes, *sir* ," he said. "I want to believe you. Make me believe."

The tile was cold against Itachi's cheek. His body felt like lead, but his arms and chest and legs were shaking with such fervor it took everything he had to lay still. He wanted to throw himself at Gehard and hit him and hit him and hit him until the man's body crumpled like tin foil, but he didn't have the strength. He closed his eyes and tried not to think of the red handprint that Gehard had branded on his mother's face. It would be better to wait, just wait. He had to stay still. He had to be patient. Someday—No. For now it was better not to think about that. He had to wait, just wait. He had to stay still.

He repeated the litany until he was numb to everything else. If he moved, he would be kicked. Worse, his mother would be hurt again. Gehard might break her jaw if she tried to defend them again. And Rina? He tried not to look in her direction. She was so quiet, like a doll that had been broken. So he stayed where he was too, shaking, trying hard to hold it all in.

"Yes, sir," his mother said, loud and cool. Itachi forced open his eyes to look at her. She was still on her knees. The muscles in her face were clenched so tightly he could see the stress in her jaw. Gehard was right about one thing. Itachi's mother was good at lying. He had seen her lie and lie and lie his whole life. She was so good at it, no one knew the real her; she didn't show that face often. "Please forgive me, sir."

Itachi's father— *not* his father, he prayed with sudden wild, desperate longing—was quiet for a moment.

Gehard grunted. "I'm going to the bank," he announced. "I'll call on the manager personally. I'm going to freeze your accounts so you don't try to run out of here. You're going to have to earn my trust back. You understand?"

"I'll wait here, with the children."

"I expect dinner at seven. We'll all sit down and have a quiet meal."

"Yes, sir."

Itachi listened, his heart beating in his chest, as Gehard walked barefoot across the pristine, white marble entryway of their elegant home to the front door. He listened as the man pulled his boots on his feet, stomped them on the floor and shrugged into his coat. He listened as the front door opened and then shut with a heavy thud.

He stayed still for a moment, listening to the silence, to the hum of tension in the air, and breathed in through his nose.

"Mom," he said, raising his head slowly.

She was bent over her knees, silent, but he thought she might be weeping.

"Mom…" he whispered again.

Rina lifted her head. She looked pale as winter, her dark eyes black pools of emptiness. The blood had dried on her forehead. She was the first to stumble to her feet. The one she ran to was Itachi, her legs trembling to hold her weight as she wobbled across the floor. He sat up just before she reached him and caught her in a rough hug, holding her tight as she clung to him.

His mother lifted her face. He couldn't see any tears on her cheeks, but her slender arms were shaking. She was angry, he realized, angrier than he had ever seen her, angrier than she was sad or frightened.

She was on her feet in one swift, sweeping movement. Itachi stood too, still holding Rina, whose grip had relaxed around his neck. His mother's expression was focused. He trusted that look to his bones.

He had seen her win more often than he had seen her lie. He waited for her to tell him what to do.

"Pack your things," she said. "Your sister's too. Just what you can carry. Right now."

He didn't need to ask why. "Where are we going to go? Aunt Cecile's?"

His mother shook her head. "We can't go to Cecile's. He will look for us there first. When he doesn't find us, he will look everywhere, all over town, in every home and establishment that knows my name."

"He wouldn't hurt Cecile."

"He'll find a way to get to us," his mother said, still pacing the room. "We can't be anywhere near here." She stopped pacing and turned to face him. "Didn't I tell you to pack? Go now! Quickly."

"Mama," Rina bleated, and tore free of Itachi's arms to run to their mother.

Itachi abandoned them to each other and darted out of the room to pack. In his own room, he hardly looked at what he grabbed. He left his books, his guitar, the expensive clothes he had been planning to wear to a party, and took only what he thought was practical—a hooded jacket, a change of clothes, his pocket knife, a handkerchief, all the money he had been saving up in his drawer, an unopened bar of soap, his abacus… His eyes darted around the room for something else worth taking. This was it: his whole life. It was just stuff.

Seeing nothing essential, he closed the door on everything he had ever owned and went to his sister's room to pack for Rina. She would need clothes too, and a coat—but not the fur one she loved most—and hair ties, of course. She would want to take her music books, he knew, and a lot of other unnecessary things probably; it was best if she never came in to remember what she was leaving.

He packed only the competition piece she had been working so hard on and stopped in their shared bathroom to add some toiletries.

When he returned to the living room, his mother was stuffing a purse with silk scarves and jewelry—all of her jewelry; her diamond earrings, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, even her wedding ring went into a bag. It took him a minute to realize that she must be planning to pawn it.

"Hurry," she said, when she saw him. "Rina, are you ready?"

Rina nodded. Her face was scrubbed free of tears and she had tied the ribbon back in her hair. Itachi tossed her coat and backpack to her. She shrugged into her coat and peered inside her bag, but put it on without saying anything.

"We have some food," his mother was saying as she lifted her own bag over her shoulder and picked up a second filled with the things she was planning to sell. There was a third on the floor, filled with packaged items from the pantry. "It's enough until I can get money. Itachi, do you think you carry…?"

He slung the food bag over his shoulder without a complaint. His mother took Rina's hand.

They left the house together, walking out the front door and hurrying down the street without slowing or looking back. It was dusk, but not yet night. Itachi was glad of his jacket.

"Where are we going to go?" Itachi asked as soon as they were out of the neighborhood.

"As far away as we can as fast as we can."

"But where do we stop?"

"The Land of Fire."

"Where the hell is that?"

His mother's face was impassive, stony. She didn't tell him to watch his language. "Far far away," she said. "Over the mountains, across the water, across the desert."

Itachi almost stopped in his tracks. He had been thinking they would hide out in the next city, or the countryside, or somewhere down south on the coast at the furthest. But this… this was another land, another continent, another world. Now that he thought about it, he *had* heard of The Land of Fire—once—in an obscure lesson on far off cultures in a history class.

"Have you been there before?" he asked.

"Yes. More than once. It's a long story. The first time, I went for a reason." She looked at him significantly. "I went for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Gehard was…different when I first married him, but not so different. I saw him for what he was and I knew…" She took a deep breath. "It's a long story. Suffice it to say that he doesn't know the extent of what I've done. He would never think I would go so far. He wouldn't think I had it in me to leave my comforts behind, not even to save my life."

"How do you mean you did it for me?"

"I met your father there."

Itachi stared at her. "My…?"

"Your real father," his mother said firmly. There was a dangerous light in her eyes, a force he wasn't using to seeing. "That land was war torn, ravaged, dangerous, but it was the best place to go for what I needed. It's different now. We'll seek asylum in your father's country."

Rina was listening too. Her face looked strange. Itachi wondered what she was thinking.

"There's a village," his mother continued. He could almost see the wheels turning in her head behind her eyes. "A village where your father grew up. The two of you might even have family there. An uncle."

"Just one?"

"Just one," his mother said grimly.

"I don't want to go to a village!" Rina cried suddenly, her voice scrunched and tiny sounding like it always was when she was stressed or tearful or tired.

"Be quiet, Rina," Itachi told her. He wanted to hear more. "Who is my uncle?" He wasn't brave enough to ask about his father—not yet.

"I never met him, but—"

"I don't want to go to a village!" Rina screamed again. She clutched her mother's hand and pulled her arm until she halted them all in the middle of the street. "They won't have Conservatory! The Music Competition is in spring! I can't miss it!"

"You'd rather stay here?" Itachi snapped at her.

Rina dropped her mother's hand and quieted, looking hurt and sulky. She didn't cry. She wasn't sad. She was upset. He understood. They were leaving their lives behind, everything all at once, and she was just beginning to grasp it. They would start over, in a distant village, as nobodies. Some part of her was reacting and rejecting the change, objecting violently, irrationally. She so loved music.

He knelt in front of her, waiting patiently until tears filled her eyes. She refused to look at him, embarrassed. "I'm sure there will be some place you can sing," he said softly. "Maybe even someone

really special to teach you." He looked back at his mother. "What kind of village is it?"

His mother was silent for a moment. "It's a hidden village," she said. "A Shinobi village."

Itachi was struck momentarily speechless. Rina looked first to him and then to his mother, gauging their reactions to know how she should react. She was baffled. She didn't know the word. She hadn't studied it in school yet. She didn't even have World Cultures until next year.

"A ninja village?" Itachi asked. "Real ninjas?"

"Yes. Your uncle is one. So was your father."

"Honest to God ninjas?"

"The name of the village is Konoha, the Village Hidden in the Leaves, or Leaf Village. We will ask them to take us in, at least for awhile, and hope they agree."

"Why wouldn't they? Too many secrets?"

"That, yes, but that's not my biggest concern."

"Then what?"

"Given who your father is, I don't know if your existence, or Rina's, or mine, we will be welcome."

"Why?"

She took a deep breath. "You're named after your father, Itachi Uchiha. He was a rogue ninja of the village we're going to. He was also a murderer."

TBC

Reviews-especially long ones-are deeply appreciated, not just because they make me happy, but because they help me know whether what I'm writing comes off as I think it does or ought to. This chapter is all Original Characters, and OCs are a hard sell in fanfic. So what did you think? Will you read on? The next chapter will take place in Konoha.

Chapter 2

Hello! I said in chapter one that (since this story is heavily OC focused) that if I got 5 reviews, this story would be a success. Whoo hoo! Major victory. That being said, this chapter takes us to Konoha. Yay for Naruto characters!

Notes :

Thank you very very VERY much to everyone who reviewed, especially those of you who were so detailed and speculative. If you show you are thinking about the story, it makes me excited about writing it.

I would like to answer some questions:

Where is Lucia's family from? Some people who asked this question seemed to be equating Naruto's country to Japan. I see Naruto as taking place in a different world (that just resembles Japan in some respects), so it's hard to explain where Lucia's family is from. The name Van Alstyne is Dutch, but that shouldn't really help. I wouldn't worry about it.

I'm ignoring the problem of communication hurdles like language barriers!

I'm also not worrying about anachronisms in technology, mostly because Kishimoto doesn't either. So don't put too much weight on what technology is available. If you want, you can assume whatever telephone system exists in Lucia's homeland is only available to rich people, and not available in Konoha, but I don't really think it matters.

About the manga: I'm aware that I'm taking a risk writing a story like this in the middle of the manga when everything can change in a chapter! Ka-pow: My whole premise could be shattered. It'll become

clear what my premise is as it moves along, but here's the shakedown:

Naruto has become Hokage sometime in the last ten years. Sasuke was reconciled to Konoha somehow at some point. The story starts off SasuSaku, bearing in mind the characters are around 24 and a lot could have happened since the manga and still could happen in the future. If any of this changes in the canon, I will either adapt this story as I go or ignore the canon. Explanations that are relevant will be integrated in the story.

Manga reveals for Itachi's character are not a problem (so far). This will make sense with more development.

So anyway, here we go!

White Rain

Chapter 2

By Zapenstap

"Rina?"

Itachi stopped walking and looked back at his sister. She stood in the middle of the road, her pack dangling from limp fingers, free hand rubbing her eyes.

"You want me to carry you?"

They'd been walking along the same dirt road for hours. Trees lined both sides of the path: huge trees, with branches so thick a person could walk across them. The trees here were strange to Itachi. They had an air like living giants. Their lower boughs curved like arms and the upper branches sprouted leaves that competed for sunlight in rounded knobs like bushels of grapes rather than the pointed cones he was used to. The forest stretched seemingly forever in all

directions, the trees angling out of rock or shooting up from the dirt in a rolling terrain just shy of being mountainous.

Although the scenery distracted Itachi with its beauty, he was too tired to fully appreciate it. All he wanted to do was lie down and sleep for a week. Still, he'd carry Rina if she couldn't walk anymore. She wasn't that heavy.

"I'm okay," Rina said. She shuffled forward to grab his hand and whispered, "Don't leave me behind."

He clasped her hand firmly and shook her arm with a smile. "I'm not going to leave you behind."

They followed the road to where their mother was refilling their water supply. She unscrewed the cap of the leather thermos and held the container under a stream that trickled down the corner of a rock ledge just off the path. The water spilled across the inside of her wrists as she tilted the thermos, but she didn't seem to notice the cold.

Itachi had thought his mother would look starkly out of place in the country, especially in the middle of the forest, accustomed as he was to seeing her decked out in the latest fashions—almost always dresses—with jewels in her ears and bracelets on her wrists and her nights filled as they often were with theatre, art, wine, and parties.

But she didn't look out of place. She looked natural.

In the humidity, her dark hair had become wavy, with the ends curling around her face and shoulders. Her expression was the essence of ease. She tilted her face to the blue sky, absorbing the warmth and heat from the sun, and handed the bottle to Rina, who drank thirstily. If Itachi hadn't known better, he would have thought his mother grew up in the forest.

But he knew she hadn't. He suspected it was the freedom that made her look so peaceful. Out here, she was away from Gehard, away

from everyone, on the road with her children close by her side—safe. Out here with no one to entertain, no one to manipulate, his mother seemed cleansed of the layers of cunning he was used to seeing in her smiles, her movements, the soft, playful glitter of her eyes.

"How far is it?" he asked as she handed him the refilled thermos.

"Not so far now, I don't think," she said. "I believe we're quite close."

"You don't have a map?" Rina asked.

Their mother smiled at them both, and there the cunning was again, secrets upon secrets cloaked as he always remembered with layers of elegance. She looked so *reasonable* , he wondered if he shouldn't trust her.

"There is no map to this place," she replied. "But don't worry. I know where we are going."

Travel suited her, Itachi decided. They seemed to have money enough to sustain them—cash always, from what his mother was able to haggle for her jewelry along the way—and although their days were long, both he and Rina were well-fed, generally pretty well rested, and physically toughened up after the initial first days of sore muscles and crankiness. Why shouldn't his mother feel good about her situation? They had escaped.

It was harder for Itachi to relax.

There was too much to think about: What they had left behind, why they had come here, what business his mother had with this place, and the origins of his existence.

Along the way, Itachi asked all kinds of questions about this village they were going to, probing about his biological father and other relatives—all murdered by his father, as he found out, except for his uncle. Rina's eyes seemed to have grown permanently larger since his mother told them what she knew of that story. Itachi avoided

anxiety with curiosity. He asked endless questions, but most of the answers he got were evasive, or full of holes.

So in hushed whispers in the dead of night, he and Rina fabricated the details. They imagined all kinds of ways the murders could have happened, embellished a great deal by what little Itachi knew about ninjas, but his father's character eluded them both. Given his mother's history with Gehard, Itachi wasn't sure he wanted to know what her lover had been like, however short the union. His mother gave the impression that she had planned to have a son by this man, but was evasive on the reason, and silent on the personal details.

She also didn't explain what she intended by bringing them to his father's birthplace. As far as Itachi could figure, they had no place here, and might not even be welcome. When he ventured to ask about this, though, his mother waved away his concern with such confidence that he trusted her judgment.

"How do ninjas get any work if no one can find them?" Itachi asked as they started moving again. He had kept himself occupied for hours on the boat trying to puzzle out how a village of ninjas achieved economic sustainability. "They operate on a basis of work for hire, right?"

"There is a bidding process conducted through correspondence by post and billboard and through the Feudal Lords, who rule this country. Clients who need to enter the village proper are escorted in and out. Any that travel close are picked up and brought directly to the Hokage—that's the leader of the village—under guard." When Rina made a little sound, she added, "The guard is for their protection, more like an escort. If we are as close as I suspect, we should get noticed soon ourselves. Don't be scared. They wouldn't have any reason to see us as a threat."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"I told you. I've been to this country before."

"Yeah, but…" He struggled with the words, not sure how to get to his question without referencing that he had been conceived somewhere in these lands by a murderer—an idea that refused to lodge permanently as fact in his head—and that such an encounter couldn't possibly have taken all that much time. What else had she been doing here to know so much? How long had she stayed to learn it all? How planned had his conception been? Why had she done it and why did she choose someone like that?

As he was thinking about the best way of framing these questions, Rina squeaked and pulled hard on his arm.

"What?"

But he knew as soon as he spoke. The branches of the trees along the road swayed, tiny green leaves shaped like triangles jiggling like noiseless bells on either side of them. Rina rolled her eyes and Itachi followed her gaze. A man had appeared in the center of the path in front of them, rising from a crouch to impede their way. He didn't make a sound.

Itachi had only a moment to take in the sight before they were surrounded by more human figures on all sides. He took them to be ninjas, men with faces covered, some with arms and legs wrapped in what looked like an assortment of cloth bandages, though no one appeared injured. Weapons were clearly visible on some of their persons, though none were held threateningly.

Itachi took measured, calming breaths as the ninja that appeared before them first stepped forward. He approached Itachi's mother and pulled a cloth mask down to speak to her face to face. Itachi took the gesture to mean that the guards—or whatever they were—didn't intend to murder them on the road. His heart was beating hard in his chest, but he tried his best to stay both calm and alert, keeping an arm in front of Rina. She had tucked her lips in between her teeth and was staring singularly at the man who approached them with equal amounts of alarm and curiosity.

Itachi took a closer look. The ninja standing before Itachi's mother had the strangest eyes Itachi had ever seen. They were pale and glassy, like milk, only pale purple. The pupil was indistinguishable from the cornea. For a moment, he thought the man was blind, but he did not act blind.

Itachi's mother spoke calmly. "My name is Lucia Van Alstyne. These are my children. We are unarmed."

Another of the ninjas removed his—Itachi blinked— *her* facial covering and moved to stand beside the man with the strange eyes. She had a pretty face, prettier than he would have expected for a warrior woman, brown hair gathered up neatly in knots on either side of her head and tied with scarlet ribbons. "This is pretty unusual, Neji" she said quietly, but loud enough to be heard. "What do they want?"

"I'm a client," Itachi's mother said smoothly. "I would like to state my business to the Hokage of the Hidden Leaf Village. In person if I may."

The ninja named Neji turned his head to look at him and Rina. Itachi was certain now that he could see. His brow furrowed slightly when he looked at Itachi, and the longer he stared, the more Itachi felt the heat of a piercing, but silent interrogation. Neji didn't say anything, but he glanced questioningly at the ninja woman who had spoken to him. She was looking at Itachi too, just as perplexedly. When Neji glanced at her, she just shook her head.

They can see it , Itachi thought, *but they aren't sure. I must look familiar somehow, maybe like my father. Did they know him?*

Rina tugged on his arm, but he shushed her with a gesture before she could say anything.

"I'm Tenten," the woman said. "This is Neji. Follow us. We'll take you to the Hokage."

Sakura sat behind the Hokage's desk, staring at the papers piling up and wondering how she had been suckered into doing all this work.

It wasn't her job. The only thing that kept her reading and signing off on these reports was the fear of trusting Naruto to do it unsupervised. When he was focused on a challenge, he might sign his name away without looking at any of it as likely as not.

She glared in Naruto's direction as she placed Iruka's suggestion for forming new Genin teams out of this year's Academy students in the "half done but waiting the Hokage's approval" pile. The new teams were one of the things Naruto would want to look at no matter what. It was duties like paying bills and ordering supplies that he "delegated" to others.

She really didn't mind helping most of the time. But today was different. Today she wasn't helping. She was being used. Today, right now, at this very moment, Naruto, the greatest Hokage, was *sleeping* on the job, not five feet away from her. It was infuriating.

He had summoned her to the office in a panic, begging for a consult, bemoaning that the ever-evil "they" (his staff and advisors) wouldn't let him leave. She had found him holed up in the Hokage's office as expected. As soon as she came in, he hung a sign on the outside of the door that they were having a "meeting" about official village business and were not to be disturbed, and shut the door. Then he had gestured to the piles and piles of paperwork, complaining bitterly about aching muscles and being sleep deprived from "training" and how lonely he was that Hinata was away on a mission, and would she mind giving him a hand? He had fallen asleep on the couch five minutes later.

That was two hours ago!

"Honestly!" Sakura fumed, throwing down the pen. "This is your own fault, Naruto! Staying up late hatching your strategy, always trying to best Sasuke. You're just like Gai. Actually, the pair of you are much worse! At least Kakashi doesn't encourage Gai. It's so stupid!

Nobody but you two *cares* anymore about who is stronger! There is real work to be done!"

Naruto mumbled something at her in his sleep, which sounded vaguely like "Thanks, Sakura, you're the best" before he rolled to his side and started snoring.

"Oh! That's *it* !"

Sakura was halfway across the room, chakra charged and fist clenched to pummel the living daylights out of Konoha's greatest hero, when a knock sounded at the door.

Naruto sat up, back hunched forward and eyes blurry, half-holding out a hand to catch Sakura's fist, which she had stalled in mid-hurl to turn her attention toward the door.

"Can't you read the sign?" Naruto mumbled. "It says…" He yawned loudly, "that we're in the middle of serious official business."

"Come in!" Sakura snapped.

The door opened to admit Tenten's bright, cheerful face. "Everything okay in here? Sorry to disturb you." Looking at Naruto's drowsy expression, she grinned.

"What is it, Tenten?" Sakura asked.

Naruto blinked slowly into alertness. Tenten entered the room, holding the door half open behind her for Lee, who crept to the frame and leaned only halfway in to peer at Tenten with a frown on his face.

"We have a client," Tenten announced.

"Oh great," Naruto said. "Can't they wait? I'm so busy."

"Oh please!" Sakura exploded in exasperation. "You know we can use the income!"

Naruto's expression shifted to something more serious. He knew what a position the village was in. Everyone did. "You said last week that we have more offers than we can handle," he said.

"Another never hurts," Sakura mumbled. "There's a lot of debt to pay. Besides, it could be important." She turned to Tenten. "Did he say what it was about?"

"It's a woman," Tenten told her. "Her name is Lucia Van Alstyne. She wants to speak personally to Naruto."

"Tenten!" Lee burst through the door, squeezing past his old teammate and slamming the door shut with such bone-jarring force that the scrolls on the wall wobbled precariously. He pointed an accusing finger at Tenten. "You must not address the Hokage as anything other than Hokage! You must show the utmost respect to his position and authority to this village!"

Tenten held up both hands, palms outward. "Okay, okay. Relax, Lee."

"I will not relax! Hokage, sir!" He pointed at Naruto. "You are far too complacent with my old team and the Rookie Nine! None of us are rookies any longer! You must hold us to the same standard as every other Shinobi and civilian of the village!"

"Huh?" Naruto muttered. "What are you talking about? Sakura, what is he talking about?"

"Ah, Sakura!" Lee said, bringing his heels together and standing pencil straight at attention. "I did not see you there. You are looking as radiant as always."

"Yes. Thank you, Lee," Sakura interrupted. "For the compliment and the…um, etiquette lesson. What about our client?"

"Neji is with them in the waiting room," Tenten supplied, and at Sakura and Naruto's questioning glance at "them" added. "She has

two children with her."

"Children?" Naruto asked. "What children?"

"Well," Tenten answered slowly. "That's the funny thing. They look… well, at least one of them looks…"

She exchanged glances with Lee.

"Like what?" Sakura asked.

"Like Sasuke," Tenten said helplessly.

For a moment, Sakura didn't think she heard Tenten correctly. Surely Tenten wasn't implying that Sasuke somehow had a child who had just appeared out of nowhere. She must have heard the name wrong. Until…

"Sasuke?" Naruto muttered. "How is that possible?" He said it as if he really didn't know, as if it had never occurred to him how a child could possibly resemble his friend and rival. Of course he *knew* better. Sakura *knew* he knew better.

As if the question had confirmed the answer, images blossomed in Sakura's head in a blurred collage of possibilities. Who knew what Sasuke had been up to all those years he was gone? Was it possible that somehow Sasuke had… She blushed, and tried to think of something else, something halfway sane, but wild speculation assaulted her imagination, accompanied by a feeling like nausea, as if someone had punctured her gut with a needle. The cramping, dizzying pain was so sudden, so unexpected, and so awful, that it startled her into silence.

"What do you think, Lee?" Tenten was saying. "The older one. Don't you think he looks like Sasuke?"

"No!" Lee said adamantly, almost contemptuously, his eyes sliding sideways in Sakura's direction. "He doesn't not look one bit like

Sasuke. I do see the Uchiha resemblance, but I think the boy looks like Sasuke's brother Itachi. Even his hair is the same."

Sakura's logical side tried puzzling out the inherent contradiction in that statement, seeing as Itachi and Sasuke resembled each other in many respects, but the emotional side was hyperventilating. The result was fuzzy uncertainty.

Lee continued, chin up and hands still at his sides. "I would like it to be known that I am not saying this because of feelings I have about Sasuke or anyone else one way or another. I would not do such a thing. I am saying this because I think it is true. Sasuke would have been very young, and though it would not be impossible, I do not believe this child could be his."

"Well, of course not," Naruto said. "I mean, how would that happen?"

"Keep up, Naruto!" Sakura heard herself say in a strangled voice.

Naruto waved his hands defensively, flushing bright pink. "No no. You misunderstand me, Sakura! I don't mean " *how"* like *how* . I mean… It's Sasuke. I just can't see it."

Sakura swallowed. "Right." She felt suddenly stupid. But at least her head was clearing. She was able to think. With what she knew of Sasuke, of course this child—whoever he was—couldn't be his. She knew it intimately, as intimately as she knew Sasuke.

It had to be a coincidence. There was no way that Sasuke would have a kid. It wasn't just that he would have told her, and definitely would have told Naruto, it was that she didn't think—even during those years that he was gone—that he would have gotten that close to anybody. He struggled so much with trust, even now. Naruto was right. No way. Then why did she feel this way? Did Naruto understand Sasuke better than she did? It should have been immediately obvious to her as well. It *was* obvious. So why did she react with such…fear? It didn't make sense.

Even if Sasuke somehow did *have a child,* she thought, *I wouldn't… or I shouldn't...* But there was that feeling *.*

It wasn't a reaction to impropriety, she decided. And it wasn't jealousy. It was something else, a feeling she couldn't qualify. It took her a moment to realize she had felt it before now, had felt it and pushed it down, and that the broached possibility of Sasuke having a kid, however ludicrous, had simply caused it to bubble up.

The feeling was a shock.

Am I unhappy?

"Wait a minute!" Naruto was saying, sounding alert and curious now, his eyes alight with interest. "Tenten, are you saying there might be an *Uchiha* child in the next room that could be *related* to Sasuke?"

There was a moment of silence.

Tenten shrugged. "Well, maybe. Yeah. That's what it looks like to me."

"But that's great!" Naruto exclaimed. He jumped to his feet, fully awake now, blue eyes blazing with excitement. "Don't you see? Sasuke has relatives he doesn't know about! Isn't that good news, Sakura? Won't he be excited?"

Sakura bit her lip and studied the floorboards between her feet. Her right hand caressed the knuckles on her left. Her arms felt cold. "I'm not sure. I mean… maybe, but…maybe not."

Naruto opened his mouth, paused, thought better of whatever he was going to say, and closed it. He began pacing in the middle of the room, arms folded behind his back. "Well, maybe we should meet them first and see what they want then."

"Neji is watching them," Lee declared. "I will inform him that you are ready to see them now."

Lee marched out of the room. Tenten strolled out behind him.

"Great," Naruto said to the closed door. He turned around slowly. "Hey, Sakura."

She looked up. "Huh?"

"Can I have my desk back? Otherwise they might think *you're* Hokage."

"Imagine that." Looking at all the papers she had spent the last two hours reading and organizing, it was an effort not to punch him, but she moved so that Naruto could take the desk.

He settled in like it was home. Resplendent in his ninja gear and the Fourth Hokage's old cloak, 24-year old Naruto really did *look* impressive. He grinned at her. Fighting down a return smile, Sakura crossed her arms and leaned against the wall.

The door opened to admit their client and her children. Sakura dropped her arms at the sight of them, trying not to gape.

The woman, Lucia Van Alstyne, was the kind of woman other women loathed at first sight. Even with signs of wear from travel and sun exposure, her beauty was the rare combination of natural good looks and polished style. Sakura could tell she knew it too, that she was as aware of it as her own skin. Her clothes—though simple in design—were made of rich fabrics custom tailored to her build. She looked… expensive.

But it was her children that caused Sakura to swallow a gasp. The little girl—eight or nine, Sakura guessed—looked like her mother, only with straighter, darker hair. She looked around the room with dark, inquisitive eyes that inspected every nook and cranny, her cherub face open to examination, but her expression difficult to read.

But the boy…

"That's just… uncanny," Naruto said. He pointed at the boy. "You look *just* like Itachi."

Sakura nodded.

The boy blinked. He looked confused.

Lee was right. The boy, around eleven or twelve years old, looked just like Sasuke's brother Itachi, right down to the hair style, absent only of the facial creases characteristic of both Itachi Uchiha and his father. She couldn't stop staring at the boy's eyes—pretty eyes, black and almond shaped, with lashes just like Sasuke's. They were also open eyes, clear as windows, devoid of the walls that Sakura was used to seeing when she looked at Sasuke, the walls built to protect every inner thought, feeling, and impulse from discovery. This boy's eyes were uncensored—the first Uchiha eyes Sakura had ever seen that looked like that.

Sasuke looked like before, she reminded herself with a swift pang, *as a child, many years ago. Maybe Itachi once too…*

"He is named after his father," Lucia Van Alstyne announced. "I trust that I don't have to explain."

"Mom?" Itachi Uchiha's child had a controlled and intelligent way of interjecting. Sakura guessed that he must be feeling extremely uncomfortable, but he carried himself without fidgeting, and he didn't retract from their gazes.

"Sorry for staring," Naruto said. "Don't be alarmed. It's not you. It's just…" Naruto shook his head. "Never mind. What can we do for you?"

"Yes," Sakura agreed, clearing her throat. "How can Konoha assist you?"

"My business is personal," Lucia told them. "As you may have guessed. I seek asylum for my children, and myself, here in

Konoha."

"Asylum?" Naruto questioned.

"Are you in danger?" Sakura asked.

"Yes. From my husband, Gehard." She glanced at the boy. "Obviously not the father."

"Right," Sakura whispered. She had so many things she wanted to ask. "About that…"

"I will answer your questions," Lucia interrupted, "but if it's all right with you, I would like to excuse Itachi and Rina."

"It's okay," the boy—named Itachi! Sakura couldn't quite believe it—said. "I kind of want to hear it."

"I'd rather you didn't," his mother returned. Itachi accepted her ruling without argument.

"Sure," Naruto replied. "Maybe the two of you would like to see the village while we talk?"

"Tenten can show you around," Sakura suggested. She raised her voice. "Tenten?"

Itachi and Rina turned their heads in identical fashion as the door opened to readmit Tenten, who heard Sakura's call through the door.

"This is Itachi and Rina," Sakura said, trying to sound as natural as possible, though she was not oblivious to the way Tenten's eyebrows shot up. "Could you show them around the village?"

"Sure," Tenten replied. "How long?"

"Maybe an hour?" Sakura looked at Naruto for a nod of confirmation. "We'll send Neji to find you."

"All right," Tenten said. "Come along, you two. Ever seen a ninja village before, Rina?"

The little girl shook her head and followed Tenten out the door without the slightest hitch of hesitation. Her brother cast a glance over his shoulder at his mother, but said nothing further before tracing his sister's steps out the door.

"Please have a seat," Sakura gestured to Lucia as soon as they were alone. "Would you like anything? Tea? Water?"

The woman settled in the chair in front of the Hokage's desk, but shook her head against any additional offerings. "No. I'm all right. Thank you. Let's just get to it. I know there must be a million things you are wondering. Where should I begin?"

"How about with how you know Itachi Uchiha?" Naruto suggested.

"And why you came to Konoha," Sakura added. "And what you know of us."

"As for your village and the secret ways of Shinobi, I know little," Lucia told them, answering the last question first. "I knew about Shinobi as a child. I learned of them through my father as a result of business he conducted here years ago. He hired ninja as bodyguards. I came to this country on my own travels over ten years ago. As I am sure you are aware, the Uchiha are quite a famous clan, and their tragedy is likewise very famous. I knew who Itachi Uchiha was when I met him."

"You knew about Itachi's history then, before you…" Sakura couldn't finish. She had expected something quite different. "Did he talk about it? What specifically do you know?"

"He didn't talk about it." Lucia paused, gathering her thoughts it seemed, perhaps not knowing what was appropriate to say, or how to voice it. "I knew he killed his family," she said, "and that he left his younger brother alive. The reason I was with him was that I needed

to have a child. I needed to have a child that would look enough like my husband that questions would not be asked. I was looking for someone with a reputation, someone with my husband's coloring-dark eyes, dark hair-someone with no reason or likelihood to have anything to do with me long term. The problems I faced were personal, and internal to my family; I knew they would remain so."

"You were married when…?" Sakura lost some of her composure at this point, blushing a little at the implications and wondering how she should proceed. It wasn't that she was embarrassed. She wasn't a little girl. Her entire body would attest to that, inside and out. She was a ninja, had seen death, fought pain, won victories at great prices, but of love affairs, at least of this sort, she felt almost innocent.

Lucia faced them both calmly, poised and contained, revealing nothing of her thoughts, implying perhaps that she thought little about it. Comparatively, Sakura's personal problems seemed so small. The dreams of girlhood unfulfilled, the romantic things Sakura still wanted, even when Sasuke's arm was wrapped around her—Lucia seemed to have stopped expecting them long ago, if she ever had.

"I was married," Lucia confessed, still in that cool, factual tone. "The particulars are time consuming to explain, but there is a good reason why I needed to have a child that was not my husband's. It has to do with my family's inheritance, you see, and the kind of man I married."

"Why did you marry him?" Sakura asked, guessing that whoever he was, this husband of Lucia's was no prize.

"The marriage was required." She took a deep breath. "I married Gehard when I was sixteen, at my mother's behest. I knew he wasn't a kind man, but he was not as awful as some others, so I thought I was lucky. However, recently the situation worsened. We couldn't remain there."

"So you came here?" Sakura asked. "All this way? Why here? I mean, it sounds like what you had with Itachi was …" She cleared her throat.

"It was brief," Lucia confirmed. "A tryst." For a moment, from her expression, Sakura thought she was holding something back, but she couldn't guess what. "When I came to this country ten years ago, it was a dangerous place, but I have heard it is safe now. More importantly, I have business interests here. I have money here, invested but attainable, money my husband doesn't know about, money I can use to pay Konoha to sanction us. I can only hope that you will agree."

"Hmm…" Naruto pondered aloud. "Yeah, okay. I see." He nodded in such a way that Sakura wondered if he understood at all. "What about the little girl?"

"I don't know," Lucia said. "Rina could be Itachi's as well, but the timing doesn't necessitate it."

Sakura blinked. "But…Wait. That means you came here again," she said, "and were with Itachi again, so… It was more than once?"

"That's correct," Lucia replied. "I came to this country twice. The second time was for the business interests I mentioned, a few years after having my first child. I saw Itachi Uchiha again. Rina was conceived sometime between the end of that trip and not long after I returned home. I don't know whose she is. My husband is fond of her. She may be his. She looks so much like me that it is hard to tell."

Sakura looked at Naruto, unsure what to say.

"Okay, maybe I don't get it," Naruto said. Then he added bluntly, "What's wrong with your husband?" Sakura almost bit her tongue on his behalf.

"He's sadistic and abusive." A hint of indefinable emotion crept into Lucia's tone at this, a conditioning of strength and endurance so tightly wound it transformed her face into a wall fit to break stone. "I can handle him myself, but when he threatened by children..." She shook her head. "He will be looking for us. He will enact vengeance if he can."

"Huh," Naruto said. "Mmm." He seemed to be concentrating, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms, staring at his desk. "Well, I don't mind that you stay here then. Seems pretty simple to me."

" *Naruto* ," Sakura hissed. "Shouldn't we talk about this? It's not usual to have outsiders stay in a Shinobi village. They will be living here, for who knows for so long. Even if they're paying us, there will be questions, perhaps dangers."

"Come on, Sakura. They aren't outsiders. Her kid is Sasuke's nephew."

Sakura froze, absorbing that statement, rolling it around inside her head. "Sasuke's…nephew."

Naruto nodded. "That decides it, right? We can't turn them away, no matter what anyone says. He's part of the Uchiha Clan, and every clan in Konoha is family, and every family is precious to me." He slammed his hand down on the table and grinned, showing teeth like a wolf. "Because I'm the Hokage!"

"Sasuke!"'

Sasuke stopped at the sound of Rock Lee's voice thundering across the street. He turned, waiting for the other ninja to catch up to him. Lee ran the entire distance at breakneck speed, and then had to stop two feet in front of Sasuke, hands on knees, panting and heaving to catch his breath before he could speak.

"Sasuke Uchiha!" he finally gasped. "The Hokage has summoned you."

That was strange. Sasuke's match with Naruto wasn't scheduled for another couple of days. Naruto didn't usually assign him any missions so close to the date, and he tried to avoid spending casual time with him in the interval between the challenge and the face off.

"What's this about? Did he damage himself training again?"

"No. It is nothing like that. I have been ordered to say nothing about the particulars, but you must go directly."

"Is Naruto assigning me a mission?"

"The Hokage."

"What?"

"Even you, Sasuke, should refer to him as *Lord* Hokage."

Sasuke wanted to laugh. "Is that what he said? Well we'll see about that."

Lee turned red in the face and clenched his fists, fuming indignation and punching the air in eight directions. "Upon my life, you will pay for your rudeness one day, Sasuke Uchiha! I do not have the power now, but one day I will best you in a match, just like all those years ago! You will see! You have my word on it! Even a genius like you will recognize a genius of hard work like me! One day you will admit that I am a splendid ninja."

"I already do."

Lee, who seemed about to respond in another tirade, stopped with his mouth open, clearly flummoxed. "You do?"

"What is this all about?"

"I can not say! You must come with me."

Resigned that he would not know until he met with Naruto, Sasuke agreed to walk with Lee to the Hokage's office. Sasuke said nothing when the conversation died, merely stared at the road and at the clouds drifting lazily overhead.

Sasuke had never bonded with the others he had grown up with. As a child, he hadn't seen them as compatriots or friends. He hadn't really even seen them as people. Of course, he hadn't really wanted anyone to see him as one either. When they saw him, he imagined that only saw him for what he had lost. And if he did somehow let them in, it seemed inevitable that he would someday lose them. So he hadn't attempted to make friends. There were only mentors, rivals and losers, people he needed to best to become stronger, and people by which to measure his strength, all for his goal, his reason for surviving, for what his life had been before Naruto.

But even now, after everything, it wasn't easy to fill the void. It was hard to relate and to interact. It was harder to trust. Bonds were necessary—he admitted that now—but it was difficult. He knew it frustrated Sakura the most. Sometimes, thinking of how she twisted the sheets in her sleep, wondering if she would sleep more peacefully alone, he felt so guilty. At times, he wished they had never fallen in together, that those first hesitant, unplanned, startled, surprising kisses hadn't led to so much muddled passion and confusion.

He didn't want to block her out, or push her away, but he couldn't stop, even knowing that it chafed her when he did it, despite that she always said she was fine. That she knew he was doing it, and why he was doing it, and loved him in spite of it, only added to the guilt. He thought they were both happy most of the time, especially when he was able to forget himself, when things were busy, but in the quiet hours, it was just hard.

Everyday he just had to keep reminding himself that it would get easier, that it wasn't the same world; the past was in the past. It

would never be like it was, but maybe that was okay. He had to keep working at it, trusting that he could change, that maybe some day he would be able to forget…

He had forgotten Lee as he was thinking these things, and came to awareness with a start. He wondered if maybe he shouldn't try a new conversation, or stop somewhere to buy Sakura a gift of some sort, to make up for everything else, when his eye drifted to his left, toward one of the training grounds scattered throughout Konoha.

There was a boy sitting on a rock, one knee bent, watching a little girl investigate the Academy-training shuriken targets with Tenten. The way the boy's black hair was gathered behind his head at the nape of the neck made Sasuke start in surprise. It was shorter and thinner than…. but…. His thoughts fled, streaming from his grasp in intangible wisps. Sasuke's arms trembled, a slight shake no one would see, but which he could feel all throughout his body. It made him dizzy.

The boy turned his head slightly at the sound of Lee's voice reverberating down the quiet streets.

"I have been thinking, Sasuke, and I believe the Hokage had the right of it…"

The boy's profile was plainly visible against the sky, the faces of all of Konoha's Hokages framing it in the backdrop. Sasuke *knew* that face. His world turned sideways. For a moment, in a whirl of vertigo, Sasuke saw the mountains behind Konoha tilt dangerously on their sides.

Was this real? Was he seeing things? He had to know.

"Itachi?" he said, calling out against his better judgment. It was a croak spoken to ghosts, ghosts he knew from countless experimentation never responded.

But at the sound of his name, the face of his brother, the youthful face he *remembered* from distant days, turned and looked right at him.

And then the apparition spoke. "Are you all right?"

TBC

Reviews-especially long ones-are deeply appreciated, not just because they make me happy, but because they help me know whether what I'm writing comes off as I think it does or ought to. Thank you very much to everyone!

Chapter 3

To GW readers, Final Mission Status 11 will be up this weekend! It's being finished, plus edits.

A/N: Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed! I really appreciate it, seeing as this story is initially OC-focused and therefore dismissed (I'm aware) by people who just don't have the patience or interest in that. For those of you reading, THANK YOU. I think it will be worth it, but you will have to let me know.

Judging from what reviewers have said (**SO IMPORTANT** —please review so I know what is working, what is enjoyable, etc, and sign in if you want a response!) for the most part, readers are getting what I want them to get. Thank you thank you thank you!

A note about SasuSaku: It's difficult to write someone else's characters in general, but especially for really popular fandoms (that have diehard shippers). Since I didn't make them up, I don't know everything about them, and this is a new pairing for me. Therefore, the interpretation in this story is one among many possible interpretations, especially considering that the story isn't even over and the manga could end up NaruSaku or something else. For those who either revile or worship the pairing, try to view the interpretation here as contained within this story.

White Rain

Chapter 3

By Zapenstap

"Are you all right?"

The boy leapt down from his seat on the rock and approached Sasuke. The expression on his face matched his words, but his eyes were Uchiha eyes, black lashes framing black spheres.

Head still spinning, Sasuke stepped backward, trying to regain his balance. He had never expected to see that face again, not in the flesh anyway. The sight of it sent trembles running up his arms.

"Stop where you are," he said, and held out a hand for emphasis, keeping a measure of distance between himself and this stranger.

The boy with Itachi's face froze.

This was all wrong. Sasuke knew this was not Itachi, not the real thing and not a ghost or vision of the past. They did not resemble each other beyond features, and of course this boy was only a youth. The resemblance was unsettling, but it might be just a coincidence.

Or, he reasoned, it could be a trick.

Sasuke activated the Sharingan as a precaution, and though he did not feel that the boy by himself was a threat, he gathered lightning-infused chakra into his left hand until Chidori crackled in his fist. This was easy for him now, and he often found that such a demonstration was all that was needed to head off trouble.

The boy stood still, gaping at the ball of lightning formed from nothing, and then stared transfixed into Sasuke's eyes. His face radiated a mix of fear and wonderment. Sasuke ignored his emotions. More importantly, under the penetration of the Sharingan, the boy's appearance did not change. He was not a genjustu. Whoever he was, he was real.

"Sasuke, stop!"

Sasuke released the Chidori, though not on account of Tenten's shout. She darted between him and the boy. Her hands were empty of weapons, palms held up and facing out to fend off Sasuke's advance, despite that he had not intended to attack. Not that Tenten could prevent him from the killing the boy if that *had* been his intention.

The initial shock of seeing his brother's face on a stranger was fading. What he felt now was a kind of self-contained emptiness. He recognized it, and knew it to be manufactured, a battlement built quickly to ward off a mountain of regret that would undermine his composure if he allowed it entry. When he spoke, his voice sounded cold, almost icy, even to his own ears. He ignored it. Right now, all he wanted was answers.

"Who is he?" Sasuke demanded of Tenten, and then of Lee, who leaped to her side as if in fear for her safety. Strange. Sasuke did not think his voice sounded harsh. Maybe it was his face.

Astonishingly, the boy stepped out from behind them both, moving toward Sasuke as if in a daze. Now that the Chidori had dissolved, he seemed more amazed than frightened, more spellbound by Sasuke than Sasuke was of him. Having thrown caution to the wind, he moved boldly out of Tenten's reach and into the open. "Are you…?" the boy faltered and fell silent. Sweat moistened his brow.

"Sasuke Uchiha, this is why the Hokage has summoned you!" Lee interrupted. "Come quickly and learn for yourself."

"I'm not moving until someone tells me who he is."

"What's wrong with your eyes?" the boy asked. He was staring at the Sharingan. As soon as he spoke, he abruptly shook himself, as if realizing only upon hearing his own words that the question might be rude.

When Sasuke didn't move or speak, the little girl moved in to stand next to the boy. Ignoring Sasuke, she rose on her tiptoes to whisper something in his ear, holding her hand over her mouth so that the boy had to lean sidewise to catch her words. The boy answered her in a voice too quiet to be heard, but Sasuke did not need to hear him. With the Sharingan, it was easy to read lips.

" *Mom said 'Sasuke' was our uncle."*

"That's not possible," Sasuke stated, shaken for a moment out of his forced detachment. "That would mean..."

The little girl furrowed her brow and frowned at him, as if daring him to call her a liar. The boy said nothing.

Reigning in his emotions, Sasuke looked more closely at them both, especially the boy. Despite what he had said aloud, he could easily believe that this was Itachi's son. But at the same time, he couldn't believe it. Who? When? Why? It didn't make any sense. He could not imagine how his brother would willfully have left behind a family after destroying the one he was born to. No. This boy could just be some kind of a doppelganger. It could even be some ninja trick to deceive him into thinking… he wasn't sure what.

Speculation was worse than useless.

"I'll ask again," Sasuke said. "Who is he?"

Tenten looked questioningly at Lee. Lee shook his head, arms crossed, the corners of his mouth turned into a disapproving frown.

"We don't really know the details," Tenten said. "I could tell you what it looks like to me, but I think you already know."

"You must speak to the Hokage," Lee repeated.

So Naruto knew something about this. Sasuke frowned. And he had just let them run around? Albeit, with Tenten as a guard, but it was still unorthodox. Bursts of chakra flickered from Sasuke's fingers as he struggled with the agitation he was feeling.

The boy watched Sasuke's fingers twitch and flash, but even though his eyes were wide, he managed to address Sasuke directly. "We don't want to cause trouble," he said. "This is my sister, Rina." He gestured to the girl. "And I'm…" He looked at his sister. She stood half behind Tenten, eyeing Sasuke warily. The boy turned back. "Well, I'm told I'm named after my father. My name is Itachi."

Sasuke shook his head. He felt odd, almost woozy. To have the same face *and* the same name was too much for coincidence. "My brother is…"

He trailed off. Dead. Killed. Betrayed. A betrayer.

His mind seemed to drift out of conscious awareness, hearing but not able to comprehend beyond the alarm bells being wrung inside his skull. He didn't see anything, couldn't think, and couldn't feel beyond the dull, aching pain that crawled from his chest like some starved creature.

The tomoe of the Sharingan rotated. This time, it did not see the future. It saw the past.

" *Hate me. Detest me!"*

"What do you see… with your Sharingan?"

" *Sorry, Sasuke… This is the last time."*

" *It was… to protect you."*

"I will always love you."

Sasuke clenched his eyes shut. He didn't want to remember. He had tried so hard to forget. His brother was dead.

He opened his eyes.

"Sasuke."

It took Sasuke a moment to recognize Neji's soft, but insistent voice. It took him another moment to realize that he had grabbed the boy by the shoulders and was staring into his face, boring into him with the Sharingan, as if he could somehow communicate with his brother through this child. Had he spoken out loud? The child was immobilized in Sasuke's grip, eyes wide with surprise and more than a little fear.

"Sasuke, let him go."

Neji was calm. Others had been saying something, but he hadn't heard the clamor they were making through the din in his own mind. Neji was gripping Sasuke's left wrist, Byakugan activated, his other hand in the air, index and middle fingers extended and poised to sever Sasuke's chakra if he failed to let go.

Sasuke stared at the boy. Itachi's son.

It was difficult to unclench his fingers. They seemed to have stiffened like the post mortem of the dead. Once Sasuke managed to peel back his hands and step away from the boy, waves of nausea threatened to overwhelm him. Neji caught him as he stumbled, the Byakugan receding as Sasuke's own Sharingan vanished.

"I don't know what…" Sasuke gasped.

"Just relax. You're fine. Sit down."

Sasuke reclined against the rock the boy had been sitting on moments earlier. The others gave him room. He took several moments—maybe it was minutes—just to breathe. Slowly the dizziness cleared and his stomach seemed to settle. He gulped down fresh air and stared at the sky, ignoring everything around him as the world straightened itself. The sky was a clear, crystalline blue.

"Are you all right?" Tenten asked the boy, stooping to look him in the face.

The boy nodded. "I'm okay." He was still staring at Sasuke with wide, black, Uchiha eyes. Saskue looked away. "How do you do that thing with your hand?"

Sasuke blocked out the question, wishing the child would vanish for just a moment, and feeling too disoriented to walk away himself. "Where did you come from?" he asked Neji to get his mind off it. "Where did Lee go?" he added, noticing that Lee had left the group.

"The Hokage sent me to fetch Tenten and the children," Neji responded. "You were all supposed to meet in a controlled setting. Since that was a failure, I asked Lee to bring Naruto and their mother here instead."

"Sorry," Tenten apologized. "I thought I would show them the training grounds here, since it was thought you were training on the other side of the village. Lee said he looked everywhere for you."

"I finished early," Sasuke explained. "I was on my way back."

He was still avoiding looking at the children—Rina? And Itachi. Insane. He didn't want to look at them. He had a lot of questions, but most of them were for Naruto.

"So…" he said after an interminable silence, unsure how he felt. "These two are Itachi's…" He faltered. It just seemed so impossible.

"They're mine."

It was a woman's voice.

Sasuke looked up.

"Sasuke!"

That was Naruto, running to meet him from where the village road intersected the training grounds. Sakura was with him, and Lee beside her, but Sasuke ignored them at first. Behind them was a woman, walking with a bag slung over her shoulder, dark brown hair curling in the heat and humidity.

The little girl called Rina ran to greet her. When the girl reached the woman, she tugged at her hand and gestured to Tenten, Sasuke, Neji, and the training ground with a voice only her mother could hear. Itachi, the child Itachi, cast Sasuke a troubled look and remained where he stood as if unsure he had permission to move.

So this was the woman.

Sasuke's thoughts wandered, careened around the edges of the dark places in his mind, and skimmed over where his most precious memories congealed with the most painful. Questions bubbled to the surface, long-suppressed questions about his brother, about those missing years between Sasuke's two darkest days. If this woman really knew him… There were answers he wanted to know, but the questions themselves he wasn't sure he could bring himself to ask.

So in silence he wondered: if it *was* true, why her? Upon seeing her face and figure up close, he could understand why any normal man would need no excuse, but it didn't seem like nearly enough...not for Itachi. Had his brother trusted her? Sasuke doubted it, but if he had shared her bed more than once, he had certainly taken a risk. If that much was true, Sasuke wondered if there had been others, or if this woman was the only one during that time. It wasn't like it mattered, and Sasuke wasn't sure he cared, but there was so much about those years, and about his brother, that was a mystery.

Was this woman evidence of something from Itachi's adult life that wasn't death and pain? Sasuke wondered. Had his brother even been capable of enjoying such a thing, considering the betrayal, the hardship, the extent of his sacrifice? If to his younger brother he had been so cruel, how could he have had a lover? *How* ?

And then there were the children. Why allow such a thing to happen? Of this, Sasuke's heart was filled with even greater doubt. It could be a lie, or some kind of elaborate scheme. Or what if it was true, but his brother had been a pawn, or betrayed in some fashion by this woman? Betrayal again. He wasn't sure he could stand it, and felt his hackles rising at the thought, the dizziness and nausea close behind, and focused once more on deep, calming breaths.

"Sasuke," Naruto said, stopping in front of him and putting a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Sasuke, we didn't want you to run into them like this," Sakura whispered, her voice lowered to be heard by him and Naruto alone. "We were going to explain things first."

Sakura's hands felt cool on Sasuke's arms as she helped him to his feet. She smelled like cherry blossoms, the very flower she was named for. He didn't lean on her to rise, but he filed away the pleasure he experienced from her touch, to recall when they were alone.

"Let's talk about it now," he suggested. "Away from them. I have some questions for you, Naruto."

They did as he requested, leaving the woman and her children with Neji, Tenten, and Lee to be watched, or to ask questions, or whatever it was they would do while Sasuke sorted out more important matters. Walking between Naruto and Sakura, the three members of his former team departed from the group and reconvened in a small grove of trees a hundred yards or so down the road—out of sight and earshot.

Sasuke sat on a log in the center of the glen and listened while Naruto and Sakura filled him in on the events of the day, relaying to him the information they had learned from this woman Lucia, her two children, and the reason they gave for coming to Konoha.

"So you're letting them stay?" Sasuke demanded when Naruto had finished. "Just like that? Without even questioning her more deeply? What if this is some kind of ruse? She could be dangerous to Konoha."

"There'll be more time for questions," Naruto told him. "But I already decided we'd take her, so there was no point keeping her in suspense about it. Konoha won't turn away women and children when all they said they were looking for is a place of safety. It's even more important if these really *are* Itachi's kids. Would you have turned them out? Your brother's kids? They're innocent."

Sasuke looked away. Itachi's kids. Innocent. With all they had to go on so far, he supposed Naruto was right. They couldn't have just turned them out, but what was he supposed to do with information like this? "It doesn't mean I trust them," he said. "They could be after

something. It's a long way to travel just to escape a drunk with a bad temper, and if this woman did know my brother, she may have ties with other dangerous people. Don't forget, it isn't common knowledge why my brother did what he did. I doubt she knows anything about it, and that means she willingly slept with a murderer. I understand what you're saying, but I think we need to be cautious."

Naruto nodded, arms crossed, brilliant blue eyes staring thoughtfully beyond Sasuke at the leaves dangling from the branches. "Yeah, maybe so, but since she *is* going to stay here, I want her to feel welcome. I gave her my word. I know what it's like to be an outcast, to have everyone treat you like you're a threat, just because of an association with something others consider to be dangerous. I'm not going to do that to her, or her kids. We'll take them in, but I understand that there's a risk. So we'll also check out their story."

"He has a point, Sasuke," Sakura said helplessly. "We *can* check out her story. If she was in these lands much, even ten years ago, running around with Akatsuki, or anyone like them, someone must have noticed. We can send a team to do an investigation. We'll be able to check her story against our own intelligence without making her think we don't trust her."

"Because we will trust her," Naruto added firmly. "Unless we have a real reason not to. It's important that we do. Living in suspicion is no way to live. Besides, my gut feeling is that Lucia really is looking out for her children. So I think we should give her our best."

Sasuke looked up at the sky. Sometimes Naruto was naïve, but often "his gut" was right. Which this time? A few wispy white clouds drifted overhead now, briefly obscuring the sun.

"All right," he said. "As Hokage, you win. I'll accept their presence, at least until we learn more."

"Accept their presence?" Naruto muttered. He sounded disappointed. Sasuke looked at him, and noticed Sakura looking at them both, her eyes drifting between them, eyebrows turned down

and a concerned crinkle forming in her brow and across the bridge of her nose. Naruto plowed right ahead without noticing. "Shouldn't you be a little more… I don't know. Interested in them?" Naruto asked. "The boy is named after your brother after all, looks just like him, and he's not at fault for his mother's choices, whatever they are. I thought for sure that you would see this as an opportunity."

"Naruto," Sakura began. "Don't push it. Sasuke just said he doesn't trust them yet, and anyway, it's not easy to just…"

Sasuke interrupted her. "An opportunity for what?"

Naruto made a face, the kind of face he made when he failed to think an idea through completely and wound up with a truism that didn't quite fit what was needed.

"Hmmm. I was thinking that since he's your nephew, well… that's one more in your family, and when you get around to rebuilding your clan…"

"My family is dead," Sasuke interrupted quietly.

Sakura bit her lip.

Naruto didn't say anything. His blue eyes slid away from Sasuke's face, but Sasuke could tell he was thinking, that the wheels were turning inside his skull, and that whatever ideas he was coming up with were going to be ridiculously insufficient.

"Naruto…" Sakura whispered again. She put a hand on his arm. "Seriously. It's not the right time."

Naruto threw up his hands. "All right. All right. I just thought I would mention it."

"Look," Sasuke said. "It's not that I don't appreciate the thought, but things are never going to be like they were for me. I can't rebuild the past. Besides, even if this kid has got Itachi's blood, he wasn't born

here, and he wasn't raised by anyone in the clan. He's not an Uchiha. He's not even a ninja. He knows nothing of our way of life."

Naruto folded his hands behind his head and grumbled something under his breath. Whether he meant to be understood or not, Sasuke heard him anyway: "He could be if you trained him."

Sasuke didn't answer. He would trust Naruto, but he wanted nothing to do with the boy. It was hard enough trying to get by with his memories of the past following him like ghosts. A constant reminder walking around with his brother's face was not what he needed. He would put up with the boy's presence in the village, but he didn't want to know him. He wasn't going to get invested.

"Just keep me posted on anything you learn," he said. "I want to know what they're up to."

Naruto sighed. "Well, okay. It's decided then. I'll settle things with Lucia and figure out a place for them to stay. While they're here we'll have some people keep an eye on them and tomorrow I'll meet with the Jounin…"

"Tomorrow's our fight," Sasuke reminded him. "Don't forget."

Naruto grinned. "Oh, don't worry! I didn't forget about that!" He turned to Sakura. "By the way, Sakura, I could really use a few extra hours training if you think you could help me out with some things in the morning. Minor things. I'd *really* appreciate it."

Seeing the expression on Sakura's face, Sasuke internally winced on Naruto's behalf.

Sakura's face turned a bright shade of pink. "You just don't want to go through the mail!"

"Please."

"No."

"Please! Come on. It won't take more than an hour this time, I swear."

"No." But she laughed.

Sasuke could tell it was a losing battle. Sakura would end up helping, but only under certain conditions, and when Naruto slithered out of those conditions he would come to the match with a black eye.

Sasuke reclined and looked at the sky through the trees as the argument between Naruto and Sakura escalated to outright silliness —the state in their bickering where Sakura's indulgence of Naruto's antics turned to annoyance and she started to rail on him. At length, they settled on a compromise that was much what Sasuke had predicted.

With farewells, Naruto left the grove, muttering about working out the details of room and board with Lucia and her family.

Sakura remained behind, holding her right arm behind her back with her left hand clasping her forearm below the elbow. Sasuke recognized the stance. It was a gesture of contrition, but only because she had something on her mind and wasn't sure if it was the right time to bring it up. She rocked on her heels in silence for a moment, eyes darting around the grove to admire the leaves glimmering like emeralds from the tree branches.

"You have something you want to say?" Sasuke asked her as the silence between them ripened into richness.

He sat up to accommodate her as she settled down on the log to his left. They sat like that quietly for another few moments. Sakura leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, her hands clasped loosely in front of her, staring at the ground between her feet. Sasuke touched the back of her head and combed his fingers through her hair, almost unconsciously, waiting for her to come up with the words.

"Sasuke, I've been thinking," she said in a soft voice.

He sensed the significance in her tone. This was a serious conversation, one she wasn't sure she wanted to broach. He tried not to press her, but it was torturous waiting for her to speak. There were so many problems, so many things she could say, all things he had thought about, he was sure, all things he had kept silent about and was afraid she would bring up one day.

Almost a full minute went by and she didn't say anything more. Her face looked crumpled, all her worries and concerns pulling down the corners of her eyes and mouth into awkward angles. He continued to thread his fingers through her hair, deliberately now, in a silent attempt to soothe her.

"I've been thinking about the future," she said. "The not-too-distant future now. And…"

He sensed where this was going. "There's still lots of time," he interrupted. He knew his face looked calm, but even to his own ears he sounded uneasy. "We're still young, really young."

"I know," she said quickly. "I'm not saying I need anything right now. I'm happy and all, but I have been thinking about it. I love you, but I just want to know…" She bit her lip, hard so as to stop it from quivering, and looked even more pointedly at the ground. "Do you really love me? I know you say you do, but I mean do you *really* love me? Do I make you happier than anyone else could? Do you want to have a life with me? Do you…" She paused, closing her eyes, gathering strength… "Do you ever think you might, someday, want to have a family with me?"

Sasuke opened his mouth, then shut it, not sure how to answer her question, since he didn't know the answer himself. Thinking of family was painful for him—always, no matter how hard he tried to forget the past or rationalize what had happened. He thought "if not with Sakura, then not with anybody," but that was more of a dodge than an answer, a way of avoiding the conversation. He didn't think that

was the response she was looking for, especially since "not with anybody" seemed undeniably possible, even preferable.

For her to bring this up now, the new arrivals must have affected her, he realized, just as much as they did him, but in the opposite way. He had seen a child that looked like his brother and was torn with grief over what he had lost, over what had been done to him, to his brother, and what he had done. He never wanted to feel like that again. But Sakura… What did she see? A child that looked like *him* perhaps: an Uchiha child. It had unearthed worries that were already there, problems that had just been lurking in the shadows. She must have looked at the child and wondered if she would ever have the family she desired. Sakura understood Sasuke's difficulties, but that didn't mean she was incognizant of her own needs.

"I know that it's not necessarily me that might make you say no," she said, as if guessing his thoughts, which she was getting quite good at. "I know that, I do, but if you *do* say no, then I also don't think it matters if the problem is me or not. If it's not going to happen, regardless of the reason, then it's not going to happen, and if that is the case, then I really have to think. I mean I really have to *know* if this is enough, if I'm *really* happy, not just for now, but really happy with you. Just you."

"You're not happy," he said quietly.

She looked up, tears beginning to pool at the far corners of her eyes in spite of her forced smile. "I *am* happy. Right now, I am happy."

He disentangled his fingers from her hair. He hated feeling like this: Ineffective. Defective. "No, you aren't," he said. "If you were really happy, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Sasuke…"

He stood up and walked away from the log, putting a few feet of distance between them so he could try to think.

"Why don't you think I love you?" he asked, not looking at her, but aware that she was watching him.

"It's not that I think you don't," she said. "It's just that I'm not sure if it's as much as you could, or as much as I want. I think you love me, but I don't feel like I'm a part of your world, or part of your heart, or that we are really *living* together so much as occupying space together. And I don't think it necessarily has to do with me. It's more like… you're holding back."

Holding back. He closed his eyes. Of course he was holding back. He'd been holding back since the beginning. To allow friendship back into his heart had been a painful choice, a colossal step, but one he had managed and not regretted. To allow Sakura to progress from friend to lover to girlfriend had been a whirlwind of terror and confusion. The first time they kissed it had almost been an accident, but it had awakened such a torrent of emotional and sexual desperation neither of them could stop the progression. It had escalated rapidly from mouth-bruising kisses to days spent together on end, to hesitant, questing touches, to the first time in bed together, to the confession of feelings, to solidifying their relationship…. And now, just when he was starting to feel like maybe he could catch up, take a breath, adapt, or relax… it wasn't enough.

"I do love you," he said. He was sure he loved Sakura, as certain of that precious fact as he was of anything. "But I don't know about the future. If you really want a family…"

"Some day," she said quickly. "Not right now. I'm not asking for it, just the possibility."

"Even some day," he said. "I'd like to think it's possible, but I don't know."

"But… Aren't you going to rebuild your clan?" she asked. "I thought that was what you wanted."

He did, hypothetically. He wanted to establish the Uchiha name anew, but the reality of starting a family terrified him. It wasn't the daily tasks of providing for a wife and children. It was the expectation that he would have to guide them, and care for them, for the rest of his life. What if he did... but then he lost them? It was too much to think about, too much for him to handle. Sakura alone was almost too much, and if she was unhappy when he was giving all he could, he was better off never having children.

He was too young, too immature, his growth stunted by loss and pain and fear. He had learned early in life that the world was a senseless, deadly, unforgiving place of cruelty. To survive, he'd learned all the wrong things: how to hate, how to fight, how to kill. But now the mess wasn't in the world; it was in his head. It might take him another twenty or thirty years to be comfortable with the idea. But Sakura didn't have that kind of time.

"I don't know," he repeated. "I hope someday, but…not yet. I'm not ready for that yet. And I don't know when, if ever…" He turned around.

Sakura was crying, silently, tears rolling down her cheeks and dripping onto the dimples of her knees. His heart ached for her, and for the dream he had just slashed, but he didn't know what to do. She wanted him to be whole. She deserved someone who was, someone who was ready and able to take care of her. Sasuke didn't know who to blame. It was his problem, certainly, but this was all happening too fast for him to come to terms with any one part of it, let alone the whole concept, and it wasn't something he knew how to fix in himself.

"Sakura?" he whispered, and sat next to her on the log. He brushed the hair from her face, flicked her tears away. He didn't know what else to say or do.

She brushed a hand past her eyes, dashing her tears aside and smiling at him through the shimmer. "I'm okay. Like I said, it's not urgent, not yet. It's just something I've been thinking about."

Which was a lie, and he knew it, but he didn't have any reassuring words, so he took her face in his hands and kissed her on the lips. She accepted his kiss and then leaned her forehead against his shoulder as he pulled her lithe body into an embrace.

"Just promise me you won't give up," she cried into his shirtsleeve, and he felt her body shake in his grip with the last release of tears she would yield to the matter for some time.

He promised. But even as he held her, he knew it was another dodge. He wouldn't give up entirely, and so would string her hope in him along a little longer, until his empty promises unraveled and destroyed them both.

He didn't understand. How had *Itachi* come to start a family? Only the woman could have that answer, he knew, if he could bring himself to ask her.

Itachi stared up at the house where his family was now going to live. It was two stories, and narrow, like a townhouse, but a singular unit all its own. It was built of rock and wood, with a wrap-around plank-wood balcony on the second floor that was missing a rail on one side. The roof was also missing shingles, but it looked like it would keep out rain.

"Small," Rina whispered next to him, her eyes scooping up the dimensions of the entire house in a glance.

"But clean," their mother replied, opening the door and peering inside. It was dark inside, and a little musty, as if the building hadn't been used in awhile. She swung the door back and forth a few times. There was a faint squeak like the chirp of a bird. "The hinges might need a little oiling, but it's nothing we can't fix up."

"Does it have a bed?" Itachi asked. That was all he wanted to know.

"Three. It is partly furnished. According to the Hokage, the village has been growing, and as new houses are built for larger families, the older are left vacant. We'll each have our own rooms." His mother smiled at them. "Now that's not so bad, is it?"

"No," Itachi said. "That's great. That's perfect." He turned to Rina. "Tomorrow we'll help mom fix what needs fixing and we'll get a chance to explore the village too." His sister smiled, perking up at the suggestion of exploring and projects. She liked projects. She helped him build a tree house last summer, when they were vacationing at Aunt Cecile's country estate. She had a fine eye for detail and was even decent with a hammer and nails.

"All right," their mother said. "Let's take a look inside. Then we'll figure out something for dinner and the pair of you can retire early."

Itachi followed his mother inside with Rina close behind. The doorway opened up into an entryway leading to a small living room and a tiny kitchen. The kitchen had smooth counter tops and all the basics they would need. There wasn't much space for entertaining, but there was a round wooden table by the window for dining and an old armchair in the corner. The stairs leading to the second level were located near the entryway to the kitchen. He and Rina raced each other to see who could get to the top first.

Itachi won, and immediately claimed one of the smaller bedrooms overlooking the rooftops and the street that faced the mountain with the carvings of the faces. He only recognized one face. It was the face of the young man who was Konoha's Hokage—Naruto Uzumaki, as he had re-introduced himself upon returning from his private conversation with Itachi's uncle Sasuke and the pretty woman who had come with him.

At first, Itachi couldn't believe someone so young was leader of a whole ninja village. Naruto Uzumaki seemed so kind too, so willing to listen and help. From the moment of their arrival in Konoha, Itachi had been in an almost constant state of anxiety and dread. He had imagined ninjas to be hardened, unforgiving killers with tough faces,

warrior codes, and a lifestyle of interminable stony silences. But the Hokage made him feel at ease almost immediately. He was talkative, expressive, loud, and relatable. And if he was Hokage, he must be an amazing fighter as well as a good leader.

"And that's good," he thought out loud, staring at the face of the Hokage carved into the mountainside, "because everyone's going to be talking about us. We need a strong ally."

He had hoped, of course, that his uncle would be one to welcome them, but he knew it had been a long shot. He was aware from his own life experience that relatives weren't always welcome, and that family members could be the most villainous of all human connections. Still, even though his uncle Sasuke was a ninja, and even though his own father was reportedly a murderer, after meeting Naruto he had hoped that maybe it would be different.

He was disappointed. Sasuke was an aloof sort of person with a cold, arrogant air. He clearly wanted nothing to do with him or his sister or his mother. Itachi rubbed the back of his neck where he had felt his uncle's fingers digging into his flesh. Why had he grabbed him like that? It had been scary, but only because he had seen in the man's face such intense emotion. Itachi could only assume that it was hate his uncle felt—hate for his brother, hate for the name Itachi perhaps, and probably his face too. When he looked at him, his uncle must have been reminded of Itachi's father and the murders he had committed. Itachi tried not to take it personally. He knew little about his father, and had no attachment to those he had killed. Although it wasn't what he had hoped for, he tried to convince himself that it was fair that he continue to have no attachment.

Still, he couldn't deny that it was a regret. It would have been so cool to have a ninja as part of the family. Sasuke had red eyes! And that thing he did with his hand! Could all ninjas do that? He had heard strange stories, never knowing what to believe and what to assume was a lie. Now he assumed nothing. His mother had tried to explain chakra to him during their trip, and given a clinical approach to how ninjas used physical and spiritual energy to do the things they did,

but not being trained in the art, her knowledge was limited to textbook study and Itachi hadn't really believed her anyway. Now he wanted to know more.

"Itachi! Rina! Come downstairs and eat."

Itachi pushed away from the window and trudged out of the room with a wistful glance at his bed. Dinner first, he thought, then stay up just long enough not to get their hours turned around before crashing for a long night's rest.

Rina joined Itachi and their mother at the dinner table. While Itachi had spent his time staring, his sister had hauled her bags to her room and had changed out of her dusty frock and into a blue dress with ribbon sewn into the sleeves and hem. Itachi's mother fed them what was left of the rations, with promises to do some shopping among a million other things tomorrow.

"Perhaps some of our neighbors will be kind enough to lend us some food," she said, looking down at their meal with a sigh. They didn't even have plates. "I do not know how long it will take before I have access to the accounts I have here."

"When did you set those up?" Itachi asked between mouthfuls of dried fruit.

"Oh, years ago. Most of my assets are tied up in investments, but I have sent letters, and some of those bonds should be coming to maturity. Even so, there'll be a delay at least in transfer, and I might have to make a trip into a town with a bank to see to matters personally. We'll have money enough to not have to be beggars, but it might take a few weeks."

Itachi was thankful for that, but in the meantime, that meant they *were* going to be beggars. The money from his mother's jewelry was running low, with only a few more pieces to barter if anyone in a rural place like this could use or afford such things. In the meantime, they were stuck in a village that might have every reason to despise

them. If everyone was as nice as Tenten and Naruto, he didn't have anything to fear, but if they were more like his uncle Sasuke, or worse…

"What about school?" he asked, in part to avoid thinking about it.

"This is a Shinobi village," his mother told him. "I don't know what the schools are like. There may be nothing more than the ninja Academy. Every other trade is likely an apprenticeship."

Itachi swallowed and put down his fork. "So…?"

"You'll continue studying finance and economics with me," his mother said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

"How?"

"I brought your textbooks, and when those run out, I will teach you by example."

Itachi gaped. She brought his textbooks? Those books weighed ten pounds apiece! She had carried them all this way? "Are you serious?"

"Of course. You will spend at least two hours every evening after dinner learning the curriculum of your former school right where you left off. And until we find you a suitable apprenticeship or some other program, you will spend the rest of the day helping me fix up this house or otherwise finding work where anyone will let you earn something for honest labor. At any rate, you won't be idle."

He couldn't believe it.

"You're almost twelve," she told him. "That's old enough for a summer job, old enough to start learning how to make and manage money. Of course you will still have some time to play, but you're growing up, and the time to make your own decisions will come faster than you think. To make good decisions you must build

character through experience, and learning to work hard is the best experience of them all."

He didn't dispute the point. He had been planning to get a job after this year's term anyway, delivering packages or papers or yard work or something like that. He had been bouncing some ideas around about a little neighborhood business he had been going to set up if he had enough money to start it with. That idea was dashed now, but he supposed that was the kind of thing she meant. Besides, he knew they needed money, and he wanted to help.

"Still," she added, and lowered her eyelashes, looking down at the table as if pondering something that had just occurred to her. "I'd prefer it if you were in school, so I will ask Naruto if he can introduce me to the principal of the ninja Academy and see if we can find out a few things about it."

She said it so casually, Itachi felt sure it was planned. In fact, he wouldn't have been surprised if she had spelled out the alternatives first just to set this up to look more appealing. Apprentice work might be hard labor, and probably repetitive and boring, like chopping wood or gathering supplies or watching a storefront all day every day. But ninja Academy… Itachi felt his chest seize up as he stopped breathing in a moment of anticipation.

"If the schooling there includes arithmetic and reading and the other sorts of things you need to know, and if they allow it, then I might consider enrolling you."

"Oh," he said, and hedged in his excitement for fear that she would catch on, get nervous, and remove the option from the table. "I'd like that."

She looked up at him from beneath feathery black lashes, and he caught sight of her lips curving into a knowing smile. She knew he wanted to go. There was no use pretending he wasn't excited. "Would you?" she asked.

"I think so, yeah," he said.

"You wouldn't be afraid?"

"No!"

Actually, that wasn't true. The idea rather terrified him, not because he knew it might be hard, or that he would be really *really* behind, or that he might get hurt, but because he might not be able to do it. He didn't know how it worked. He wasn't sure if it was only possible for certain people, and if he had inherited those genes or not.

He didn't want to be a failure.

His mother turned to Rina, who was quietly eating while watching and listening. "What about you, Rina? What would you like to do?"

"I want to be with Itachi," she said, "unless there is a music school."

His mother nodded. "I will ask about that too."

When they finished dinner, their mother made him and Rina pause at the dinner table in the middle of cleaning up.

"One thing I must tell you before bed," she said. "It's very important."

"What?" Itachi asked.

"The pair of you are Van Alstynes now."

"Wouldn't we be safer choosing fake names?" Itachi asked. "If Gehard ever looks for us this far from home…"

"I think he will, eventually, but no. We are among ninja. Such a falsehood would not hold up long. You are Van Alstynes anyway and might as well get used to it. More importantly, as Van Alstynes, I want you to remember the first rule of the household. This is very important."

They waited.

"Never talk about money. In fact, now that we live here, it's best you didn't talk about where you come from at all. Answer questions truthfully, if you are asked, but don't brag, or set yourselves up for scrutiny. We live here now. I want you to acclimate. Do you understand?"

Itachi thought he did, and when he promised not to say anything, Rina promised too.

"Good," his mother said. Her eyes were dark orbs in the fading candlelight, but even in the dim glow of the flame, Itachi could see the glitter of determination and the drive she was attempting to hammer into them both. "Try to make friends here. We must begin anew."

Itachi took that to mean they were never going back.

Hours past the time her children went to bed, the house was quiet.

Lucia walked alone in the darkness. Her bare feet stepped carefully across the wood floor panels of the house's one hallway. She could feel the grain of the wood beneath her toes, the irregularities of planks cut from tree trunks, the knots sanded to smoothness, but not waxed or polished.

She passed silently by the rooms of her children, opening each door in turn and peering through the gloom at their sleeping forms. They slept like angels, faces half buried in their pillows, breathing the fresh air of a strange world. She smiled and shut each door softly, hands gliding over the wood, learning the contour of the frames in this strange house, before continuing down the hall to her own room.

In the master bedroom, she shut herself in pitch darkness and stood for a moment without moving, feeling the aloneness of the night caress her skin. Silently, she crossed the room to the far window and

peeled back the olive green cloth curtain. A sliver of moonlight spilled into the room. It bathed her face in silver light that slithered down her body to pool around her feet, illuminating the dust and lint that clung to her heels.

Beyond the window, the village was asleep, as soundly as any ninja village slept. Although she could see no human forms in the darkness, she was certain someone was watching the house. It would be imprudent for them not to.

She shut the curtains, but did not retire to the bed. Instead she pulled herself up on the wide windowsill, drug her feet in close to her body, and leaned her head against the wall.

So this was Konoha.

She was so close now. It was difficult to be patient. It was a delicate time, as fragile as those first few months of motherhood had been, when every apprehension was compounded by the anxiety of failure. Now it was success that haunted her every waking thought, hovering on the edge of consciousness like a whispering wind.

But she could endure it. Fear was her most dangerous enemy, and one she knew only too well. She had come this far. She would go through with it, all she had planned. It was too late to turn back. In the biggest gamble of her life, she must believe in the merit of her hand; because whatever else happened, she would be forced to play it to the last card.

TBC

Thank you so much for reading! I loved the lengthy feedback some of you left before. There's a lot of development, so feedback is welcome welcome welcome! If I could, I'd publish each section individually, lol, but that's not the best way to organize these chapters. Anyway, thank you very much and please please review this chapter!

Chapter 4

Hello again! This is chapter four of my Naruto fanfiction White Rain. I realize it's a strange little story I'm writing here, with all the OC-focus and what-not, but that should have been obvious from chapter one, so at least I can't be accused of deceiving anybody! I have a plan and I like where I'm going, but I don't know how you feel about it unless you tell me . Anyway, here it is. I apologize for any character ships or interpretations that don't mesh with everyone's preferences. I can't please everybody so I write it as I like it. Prepare for Chouji x Ino in this chapter.

Warnings : This fanfic is for 16+ readers (rated M). It contains sexual references , mature themes (including sado-masochism...described vaguely but not "shown"), some violence, a very little bit of swearing, and other material. , This fic FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES for this site so please do not report it as MA. There are no explicit sex scenes. All such scenes "cut off" before anything happens. Violence is typical for a story about ninjas. There isn't anything extremely disturbing described in any detail. Thx

---

White Rain

Chapter 4

By Zapenstap

Naruto walked out to the balcony as the sun rose over Konoha. A light morning breeze dried the sleep sweat from his head as he yawned and stretched his fingers above his head. He leaned over the railing and peered out over the village streets, breathing in deeply the smells of cool air, raked soil, dew on grass, and oven-baked bread.

He smiled. This was Konoha. This was the village Hidden in the Leaves.

And a new day , he thought. *Another day for living.* One more beautiful blue-skied day.

There weren't words to express the feeling of it. He stood poised and still, the tips of his fingers hovering just over the railing. He felt calm, rested, and connected inextricably to the wood of the rail, to the boards beneath his feet, to the sky overhead, and the core of himself that was an identity as solid as a mountain and deep as the roots of the giant tree that overshadowed his house. Knowing yourself, he thought, was the key to possibility.

He knew that he was Hokage. That was the truth of every morning.

There was another feeling laid overtop that certainty this morning, a tingling like a hundred thousand tiny bursts of lightning running like chills up his arms and across his gut and torso. Excitement.

He would fight Sasuke today. His smile widened into a grin.

It was always hard to contain this feeling. For someone who had never felt it, it was impossible to comprehend. It had begun with the need to be acknowledged, but that wasn't what it became.

To Sasuke, he was more than Hokage. He was a friend, a rival, and family in some respects. That meant something else, but he couldn't explain it. Love couldn't be explained.

Naruto took a deep breath and turned away from the balcony to get ready for the day.

He would fight Sasuke at dusk, which meant there was still a full day's worth of village business to attend to, and whatever training he could squeeze in during breaks. He wondered if Sakura would really come by to help, and if anyone would know the difference if it was Sakura who stamped Naruto's way through the paperwork. He

snickered to himself, and then paused, frowning while pulling his shirt over his head.

He knew she would clock him for tricking her, but he hoped she wouldn't be *seriously* mad. It was sometimes hard to tell with Sakura. He wasn't asking for her help because he was lazy. Well maybe he was a *little* lazy sometimes, but even on his relaxed days, Naruto took being Hokage very seriously. He had a very clear idea about what it meant. It wasn't about paperwork.

Being Hokage wasn't a job or a title or an office. Hokage was a person. Being Hokage meant being someone to look to-for everyone in the village. The Hokage was an advocate to everyone, a protector of everyone. As Hokage, Naruto had sworn himself in to work tirelessly for what was best for everyone. That was incredibly difficult, sometimes impossible, but he had made a promise to all of Konoha to do his best, and he worked hard every day to keep that promise. Even his matches with Sasuke were really about the welfare of the village.

The paperwork was a necessary aspect of the job, but it wasn't what being Hokage was all about. There was rarely a single piece of paper that crossed his desk that he didn't already know the details about in some length. Most of the reports were just the documented evidence of decisions and verbal contracts previously made.

Naruto made sure he heard about everything that was important, but he just wasn't a great *reader* . Reading made him tired actually, and unless it was *really* exciting, doing it for hours was sometimes impossible for him. Naruto relied on Sakura because he needed someone smart, someone who was close to him, someone he could trust to go through the documents with an attention to detail and make sure nothing was added or subtracted from what he expected it to be. Then he made it look like all he did was slack off.

He couldn't help it. It was just too funny watching her get so upset!

He grinned to himself as he pulled his shirt the rest of the way over his head. Sakura would get mad when he snuck out today. She's track him down and then they would bicker, and she'd try to punch him… Ah. That was something to look forward to.

Which reminded him. Before he met with Sakura, he had to meet with the Jounin about Lucia. That wasn't going to be nearly as pleasant—or funny. It was going to be an exercise in diplomacy convincing everyone that it wasn't a risk to the village to let a woman like her stay here. Naruto expected a number of them to disagree. Shinobi were trained to be guarded, to expect the unexpected, and to look beneath harmless exteriors for malicious motives. If they didn't bring objections, they weren't doing their jobs properly. But just because there were real objections didn't mean he wasn't doing the right thing in overriding them.

Naruto had no doubt that Lucia had motives beyond what she was telling. Lucia was clearly smart, and even though she was not a Shinobi, there was an air about her that was like that of a Shinobi—an air of someone hiding things, someone who had a history of choosing between difficult options, someone who had been hurt and expected little in the way of kindness, nor intended to be kind where it did not help her.

There was an air of something else about her as well. Naruto recognized it in her eyes. It was ambition. Lucia was after something, he was certain, but… not all ambitions were evil. He couldn't assume she was dangerous to Konoha anymore than he could assume she was not. And if she *was* dangerous to Konoha, the safest place for her to be was right under his nose where he could keep an eye on her.

But he couldn't let on that he was *suspicious* . The village was always watching him. They took cues from him, sometimes unconsciously, and if he let on that he was suspicious it would breed suspicion in others. It might even cause others to lash out. That was what fear did to people, even to Konoha Shinobi who had no reason

to think they were in any danger from a lone woman and her two children just because they were strangers.

Besides, what he told Sakura and Sasuke was also true. He felt that Konoha had a responsibility to Lucia's children. Whatever their mother's ambition, Itachi Uchiha's children had come to the land of their father seeking sanctuary. As Hokage, Naruto had an obligation to protect *everyone* who was a part of Konoha, not just those who he had grown up with, or those he liked, or even those he trusted, but everyone.

The children had done nothing wrong. For Konoha to turn its back on Itachi Uchiha's children would be a refusal to acknowledge their connection to the village, and by extension would be a refusal to honor the sacrifice their father had made for Konoha. That was an attitude similar to the suspicion that had caused so much pain and suffering in the Uchiha Clan in the first place. It would have been a betrayal, and Naruto would not knowingly betray anyone. Under his leadership, Konoha Shinobi would protect their own.

Naruto finished dressing and tied Konoha's leaf headband around his forehead. He looked at himself in the mirror. At twenty four years old, there were still a number of things he didn't know about the world, but he felt good about this. He looked at the straight line of his mouth and stared into the burning blow of his own eyes. When something felt right, he trusted his instincts.

He wasn't worried about the risks. Whatever possible dangers Lucia posed in getting what she was after, Naruto would make sure he would be able to protect Konoha. If she turned out to be more than just a risk, he would protect Konoha *and* those kids from whatever she was planning. There was no need to make compromises.

That was the whole purpose to being strong.

Itachi awoke completely refreshed the morning after his arrival in Konoha. At first, he didn't know quite where he was, but when

memory flooded back, he bolted out of bed and immediately began getting ready.

He was going to join Konoha's ninja Academy! Well, he reminded himself, he was going to *ask* to join anyway, and let those in charge determine whether or not it was allowed. He recalled what his uncle Sasuke had done with his hand with awe—the blue light, the energy, the piercing sound like many birds twittering in unison. If he could do something like that, he would never have to fear someone like Gehard ever again.

He paused in the act of pulling on his second shoe. What if they said no? He thought about it as he got to his feet. If he was denied the opportunity to train as a ninja, he would ask if there was anything he could do to make himself eligible. Maybe if he just kept asking…

Itachi tried to stop thinking about the possibility of being denied as he made his way downstairs. He took the narrow stairs two at a time, still in amazement that he was living here. In some ways, it felt like a rustic vacation rather than the severe upheaval it really was. In other ways, he felt like he had woken up a different person. He supposed it hadn't quite sunk in yet.

His mother had seemed pretty adamant that they wouldn't be returning to their former life. What was she planning for them to do? She said she had some money in this country, but how long would those funds keep them afloat? Would his mother take a job somewhere? What if *he* had to provide for the family when the money ran out? Was that what ninja Academy was about? Providing for their future? As a fallback, he could probably make a decent living as an accountant after he grew up. That might be why his mother had brought his textbooks.

"Good morning," his mother's voice called to him when he was still on the stairs.

Itachi wound around the corner and over to the breakfast bar of the little kitchen that overlooked their one communal room. His mother

was standing by the sink in a green summer dress, her dark hair still a hopeless mess of curls in this climate. She seemed to be testing the running water. Itachi climbed up on one of the wooden stools facing the breakfast bar and leaned toward her across the counter top.

"Did you sleep well?" his mother asked.

"Like the dead. I forgot where I was."

"Almost thirteen hours," his mother informed him. "It's nearly midmorning. Rina might still be asleep."

He hadn't realized it had been quite that long or was quite that late. His stomach rumbled plaintively, but he knew they didn't have any food, so he didn't ask for breakfast.

"What's the plan today?" he asked instead. He assumed she had made a plan.

"Going to the market," his mother responded, "since we have no supplies, limited furnishings, and nothing left of our stores. We have a little money left."

Before he could dwell on that, a knock sounded at the door. "I'll get it," he mumbled, and slid off the stool to cross their tiny living room to the door. He peered first through the small vertical window with etched glass, but all he could make out were the colors red and gray.

Itachi opened the door and barely stifled a gasp. A large man blocked the doorway. He was dressed in armor, his front torso sheathed in thick brown leather and protected by a series of overlapping plates. Itachi's mind flitted through several alarming reasons a warrior like this might come to their doorstep, but the man's face was not nearly as frightening as his physique, and Itachi relaxed. He had one of the most pleasant faces Itachi had ever seen in fact, round and chubby and painted with the content, closed-

mouthed smile of a man who drifted through life mostly satisfied with his lot.

As imposing as the man was, it took Itachi a moment to register the blonde woman standing next to him. The woman was engulfed almost entirely by the man's shadow. She carried an equally chubby-faced infant in her arms, a small bundle wrapped in a soft blanket and sleeping soundly. Although less physically imposing than the man, when this woman smiled, she dazzled.

"You must be Itachi!" she exclaimed. She turned to the man beside her. "He does look like his father, doesn't he, Chouji? Definitely Uchiha. He almost looks like he could be Sasuke's kid."

"Hmm…" Chouji said absently. "He looks hungry. Kinda scrawny-looking. He should eat more."

"I'm Ino Akimichi and this is my husband Chouji," the woman announced, seemingly undeterred by this response, or at least willing to run right past it. "We just got back from a meeting with the Hokage. He told us about you and asked us to stop by."

"We brought a food basket," Chouji added, as if this was the most important aspect of their visit around which all conversation must inevitably gravitate. At the moment, Itachi didn't disagree with the sentiment. He was starving.

"I'm Itachi," he replied with as much deference and politeness as he could muster. "Itachi… Van Alstyne." He flushed as he stumbled over the adjustment. "Please come in."

He opened the door for their guests and made room for them to enter. Now that they had company, he was a little ashamed of his family's living arrangements. His house back home had had a white tiled foyer, dark hickory wood furnishings, plush white carpets, a grand staircase, an interior balcony, and two upper levels with more bedrooms than their family had needed. His home now was just a narrow, two-level house with barely enough living space to keep it

from feeling claustrophobic. The furniture was old and worn and they had nothing to offer their guests except water and maybe a little of what remained of the tea.

Itachi noted immediately that in contrast their guests were well-to-do. He could spot the mannerisms of old, wealthy families, having gone to school with their children all his life, and Chouji in particular had the air of a man whose daily needs were taken care of and who was generally at ease with himself. Both Chouji and Ino were ninjas certainly, judging by their gear, but beneath the jerkins, their clothes were of good quality—strong colors and soft fabrics with subtle textured patterns and a hint of understated fashion. They also wore what looked like a family crest as part of the pattern of their clothes, though the symbols themselves were meaningless to Itachi. What really gave it away, though, was Ino's jewelry. The gems in her ears were of a modest size, but they were of superior quality, and caught the light whenever she moved her head.

"Welcome," Itachi's mother said from the bottom of the staircase, from where she seemed to descending. She crossed the room to greet their guests with graceful gestures and a warm smile. "I'm Lucia Van Alstyne. This is my son Itachi. My daughter Rina is getting ready. What brings us the pleasure of your company?"

"Naruto told us about you this morning," Chouji said. "I did not know Itachi Uchiha personally, but it sounds like a good story."

Ino's eyes bulged, presumably at her husband's directness. "We thought we'd come by and see how you're getting along," she said hastily.

Chouji lifted a large cloth bag slung casually over his elbow. "And we brought you some food."

"That is very kind, thank you," Itachi's mother said. She directed Itachi to relieve their guests of the burden, which Itachi leaped immediately to do.

When he took the bag from Chouji's arm, part of his brain registered how strong Chouji must be. The bag was filled with food, including—from what he could see—vegetables, two bags of rice, and containers filled with sugar, sauce, and the like. Chouji had lifted it casually with one hand, but it weighted almost more than Itachi could carry with both arms. He grunted as he hoisted the sack and labored as far as the kitchen pantry before having to set it down.

"Isn't it heavy?" Ino called to him. "I couldn't carry it myself. Do you believe Chouji eats almost that much in a day?" She laughed and patted her husband's arm affectionately. Chouji smiled as if proud. His wife turned to Lucia. "Do you need any help putting anything away?"

"I haven't determined quite where it should all go yet," Itachi's mother said, looking at the cupboards in the kitchen a bit quizzically. "I assume it will be all right where it is for at least a little while. Can I help either of you to some tea? And would you like to sit down?" She looked pointedly down at the baby in Mrs. Akimichi's arms and nodded to the table and chairs by the window. She smiled. "I know how heavy they can get."

"Oh, he doesn't weigh too much yet!" Ino said, and beamed with the brightness of a new mother still glowing with wonderment and excited to share her child with everyone. "Would like to see him?"

"Of course."

Itachi left the women to gab about the baby and thanked Chouji for the food he had brought. "I wasn't sure what we were going to do for breakfast," he confessed.

Chouji smiled in a way that made Itachi feel like this ninja was the nicest man he had ever met. "Make sure you eat the vegetables while they're ripe," he suggested. "My wife grew them in the garden herself and she is quite proud. She's also quite vain so it won't hurt you to compliment her on their quality." He winked. "But just between you and me, there's a side of beef and a whole chicken in there too.

A man needs meat to make him strong!" He laughed loudly, startling Ino, whose eyebrows knitted in irritation. Ino had passed the baby to Itachi's mother, who was rocking him with a pleasant, thoughtful look on her face, seemingly oblivious to anything else.

"Can I ask you a question?" Itachi ventured, thinking that he liked these people very much and feeling less apprehensive all of a sudden about the possibilities in his future.

"Hmm?" Chouji said. "Go ahead."

"How do you get into ninja school?"

Chouji tapped his young wife on the shoulder. "Did you hear that, Ino? Naruto was right." He smiled at Itachi. "The Hokage thought you would ask."

Itachi's mother looked up too, but didn't say anything.

"Most Konoha Shinobi are Konoha born and belong to ninja families that live here," Chouji said in answer to his question, "but it's not totally unheard of for someone not born here to enter. Academy's tough, though," Chouji warned. "And most kids start pretty young, around seven or eight these days. It used to be younger, and even now most kids get some training at home before ever setting foot on Academy grounds."

"But," Ino interrupted encouragingly. "There are no real consistencies in age after that. You advance to Genin when you pass the Academy test, and advance to Chuunin with the Chuunin test and the recommendation of your elders and the Hokage, and then to Jounin likewise. Some people don't ever pass beyond Genin or Chuunin. Others advance very quickly. It just depends on the person."

"Some also die in training," Chouji added. "It's more common to drop out these days in the learning stages, but casualties do happen, and if you make it to Chuunin, you're considered battle ready, so of course that poses dangers. Being a ninja isn't easy. It's real tough."

Their faces were decidedly grave when they looked at him. It made Itachi feel a little nervous again, but not deterred. He had done a lot of things that were dangerous, and had been lucky more than once. He glanced at his mother, but her face was turned toward the baby. He wasn't certain if she had even heard.

"Would they let me enter?" Itachi asked.

"That depends partly on you, I think," Ino said, "on your reasons, and some other things. Iruka will decide, with the Hokage's permission of course. But even if you're allowed, you would have to work awfully hard to catch up. And it can't be easy as an outsider."

"You've got Uchiha in you, though," Chouji said. "So that might balance it out."

Itachi didn't understand what that meant. "Why?"

"Uchiha are special," Ino said. "Your father was reputably one of the best ninjas there ever was, and Sasuke is…" She laughed. "I had such a crush on him when I was your age! Oh my, that seems like so long ago." After so much gravity, her laughing smile was so contagious Itachi found himself smiling too. "Sasuke was just cool. He did everything so well. He had so many admirers. He was a star from the day he set foot in the Academy."

" *I* didn't think he was that great," Chouji mumbled.

"Oh, I should say all the girls admired him!" Ino amended. "A good number of the boys hated him!" She laughed all the harder at the surly frown deepening on Chouji's face. "I can't believe how silly I was then. I thought the best men were just made pretty and naturally ought to be bursting with talent." She touched her husband's arm and said softly. "How wrong I was."

"Are you saying I'm not pretty?" Chouji said, putting on a churlish expression. "Or that my jutsus do not impress you?"

Ino's face turned bright pink. "No no no! Not at all. You are very handsome! And very talented! That's not what I meant!"

Chouji roared with laughter and patted her hand. "It's okay, Ino. My ego is not so big as the rest of me. I'm glad you fancied someone like Sasuke. Makes winning you more satisfying."

Ino subsided, still pink-faced with embarrassment.

"Yeah," Itachi said quietly to himself, though it was without meaning. Privately, he was not sure what to think of Sasuke. A part of him wanted his uncle's attention and approval. He wasn't even sure why. He had always felt like there was a hole in his life, even when he had called Gerhard father, and now that Gehard was gone, and his real father was revealed dead, it was just his mom and sister.

The idea of a cool ninja for an uncle had sounded great at first, but he knew that it was unlikely to amount to anything. His father had murdered his uncle's family, so it was no surprise when Sasuke had rebuffed his nephew. Even so, Itachi couldn't help thinking that if he somehow proved himself, it wouldn't matter. He decided to change the subject. "So… I should talk to Iruka then?"

"Good memory," Chouji praised him. "You listen well. That's a good ninja skill to have. Talk to Iruka. I'm pretty sure that the Hokage will want to let you try if that is your wish, so Iruka is the one to convince. Luckily, Naruto and Iruka have a close bond. Iruka was Naruto's Academy teacher, you know."

"Naruto was also the worst student in the Academy when we were there," Ino added.

"Really?" Itachi asked. How did the worst student become Hokage of the village?

"Oh yes!" Ino laughed. "I mean, I wasn't that great myself, but Naruto was abysmal! He was way behind the rest of us, so he might

empathize with you starting out so far behind. That is… if you really want to do this."

"I really do."

Ino smiled at him.

At that moment, Rina came shuffling down the stairs, wearing the same blue dress she had worn to dinner yesterday. It was one of three outfits she now owned, and the only one left that was still clean. She smiled at Itachi and their guests without saying anything and sat down where she was on the bottom step.

"This is my sister Rina," he said by way of introduction. "Rina, this is Ino and Chouji Akimichi. They brought us some food, and they're talking to me—to us—about ninja Academy."

Rina waved a hand with a polite smile and looked questioningly at Itachi.

"Does this village have a music school?" Itachi asked for his sister.

"Uh, no," Ino said. "Not really. We use music for a lot of things, but we don't have a school." She smiled at Rina. "You like music?"

Rina nodded, elbows on her knees and chin in hands, her eyes on Ino now.

"She wanted to study music to be a composer," Itachi explained to the Akimichis. "Last year she was singled out to perform an original piece in a concert at the end of the year for this prestigious competition, but…" He didn't know what to say. Rina's face was hard to read.

"Some ninjas use sound in jutsus," Chouji said. "Pretty advanced work, but if Rina is that good at music, maybe she would have an aptitude."

"Hear that, Rina?" Itachi said, grateful for something that might perk up his sister's deflated spirits. She was usually more animated than this. "Maybe you could learn to use music in jutsus!"

Rina nodded, still without saying anything.

"Where can we find Iruka?" Itachi asked, turning back to the Akimichis.

"At the Academy," Chouji answered. "He supervises all the classes now, so you'll probably find him wandering about the grounds. He has a distinctive scar across his nose." He gestured with his hand what it looked like.

Suddenly, Itachi's mother interrupted the conversation. "Why don't you make some breakfast for yourself and your sister while I talk with our guests?" she suggested.

Itachi turned at the sound of her voice. He had almost forgotten she was there. She stood by the window, the Akimichi baby still asleep in her arms. "When you've eaten, you and Rina can go find this school. As we discussed, it's your choice what you want to do as long as you commit to doing something. There's some money in my coat. See if you can't find some supplies on your way home to get us through the next couple of days. I will be here if you need me for anything."

Itachi recognized her tone. She wanted to talk to the Akimichis without them around.

Rina got up from her spot on the step and rummaged in their mother's coat until she came up with the money stowed safely in a drawstring purse. Rina came to stand beside Itachi and handed the purse to him. He deposited it in his pocket.

"All right," he agreed.

His mother smiled and turned to the Akimichis. "Would you like to talk outdoors?" she said to their guests. "It is a nice day and I'm

afraid I have little to offer you inside. We can take some chairs out with us to the porch and enjoy the sun."

The Akimichis agreed to this. Chouji managed to pick up three of their family's dining table chairs and haul them outside for himself, his wife, and Itachi's mother. They shut the door behind them.

After the adults exited, Itachi dashed into the kitchen to see what breakfast could be made from what the Akimichis had brought. He found some rolls for himself and Rina, followed by apples and a handful of nuts. It would have to do. He didn't have the ability to really cook anything without pans or cooking utensils, and this would be faster anyway. He wanted to get to the school.

Rina pulled herself up on the stool Itachi had sat on when he first woke up. She leaned across the counter the way he had too, her arms flung out in front of her and her chin hovering over her clasped hands. Her face had a glum look.

"What are you thinking, Rina?" he asked as he set her share of breakfast in front of her at the breakfast bar. He stuffed his own face quickly.

"I don't know about Academy," she said while picking at her roll.

"You don't want to go?" He had hoped she'd find the novelty of ninja training interesting, but if it was as militant as Chouji made it sound, he couldn't blame her for not wanting to get involved. Rina wasn't a timid girl. In fact, she was rather competitive, and really observant, but she wasn't the type to throw herself into situations where she might incur bodily harm. She tended to shy away from anything obviously risky. They were different that way.

"No, I'll *go* ," she said. Her chin hit the counter and she sighed. "It's a good idea. I just really wanted to be a *composer* ."

"Well, no one says you have to stop writing music," he said, "or stop singing."

She looked down at the countertop and dismissed his optimism. "No one to listen."

" *I'll* listen."

She rolled her cheek on her arm and looked up at him with cow eyes. "Will you help me finish my piece?"

"Did you bring it with you?"

"It was in the bag you packed for me. I checked."

He smiled at her. She had been working on that thing for months, taking it to her classes every day and getting help from the adults at her music school. He was glad she had brought it along, since they had had to leave her portfolio and his guitar and everything else they valued behind.

"Okay," he said. "You agree to give this place a shot and I promise I'll help you finish your piece. I'll bet you could even send it back to the Conservatory for the contest. Maybe they'll allow someone else to sing it at the concert. There's that one guitarist you like at your school..."

"Anton Landseer."

"Yeah. Well, he's way better than me anyway. I know you wanted me to learn it, but to be honest, you wrote something really hard and I'm not that good. It'd be better if he could play it, right? And I'm sure one of your other classmates could sing and play the piano part. Then at least it would still be heard and you'd be right on track for being a composer."

She nodded, looking a little happier at this prospect.

"They might go on tour too," he added. "Wasn't that part of it?"

"The winners, yeah," she said.

"Well if they go on tour, maybe they'd come to someplace around here, and then you could hear it, or even sing."

She smiled. Her eyes were brighter.

"So," he said, feeling encouraged by her reactions, "don't give up! Just because something has changed doesn't mean your dreams are hopeless. Keep writing and I'm sure something good will come of it eventually. Even if it it's not accepted this time, don't worry. You're just a kid still. You will have more chances. In the meantime, we're here, and we might have the opportunity to learn something really neat that we never would have gotten to a chance to learn at home, so…"

Rina nodded, more excitedly now, her dark eyes shining as she looked at him. "Thanks, Itachi."

He sighed gratefully. "You want to come with me to find the Academy now?"

"Yeah."

They were in agreement again.

Lucia paused in what she had been about to broach to the Akimichis when her children opened the front door. They had eaten quickly, which she took to be an indication of their eagerness. Her son paused long enough outside the door for her to acknowledge his departure. He nodded as if to say "we're going now." Lucia smiled her consent. Chouji and Ino, both sitting across from her, the latter once again holding her baby, twisted in their chairs and nodded to her children as well.

Rina stayed close to her brother's side as they left, as pretty as a picture in her blue Revva Nightingale dress, the one Lucia had bought her in an auction during the fashion soiree following the unveiling of designer Revva's newest winter line last year. It was

possible that Rina would never own anymore dresses like that again. Lucia drew a deep breath to chase away lament. She could not change her decision now.

"Such polite children," Ino said. "Both of them seem very sweet."

"Thank you," Lucia replied, at once warmed by this compliment and fearful of the day it might change. "And thank you again for your gifts. They were needed, and much appreciated."

"It's a crime to let those in need go hungry," Chouji said, leaning back in his chair and patting his stomach, "especially women and children foreign to our village. Least we could do."

"Do you bear any messages to me from the Hokage as a result of the meeting that took place this morning?" Lucia asked, returning again from pleasantries to the matters at hand.

Chouji and Ino were quiet for a moment.

"I would assume it was about more than breakfast, and that more than just the pair of you was in attendance," she said. "I would like to know my standing, if you are permitted to discuss it."

"Yes," Ino said. "All the Jounin currently not out on missions met briefly at the Hokage's request. Naruto told us about you and your children. He let us know his decision, and there was a round, well several rounds really, of discussion about it. Naruto thought you should know there was a meeting. He would have come here himself, but he had to stay behind to answer questions. We didn't mind coming. Chouji volunteered actually. Naruto also thinks, and we agree, that it would be a good idea for as many Jounin as possible to meet you and welcome you here."

"Thank you," Lucia said. "It is a pleasure to find people willing to be kind in a situation such as this. Am I correct in assuming that I'm a prisoner here? At least for the time being?"

Ino and Chouji exchanged glances. Lucia waited coolly. Perhaps she had been too blunt, but there was no other way to see it, and she had to know where she stood.

"Traditionally, everyone who lives in Konoha is bound to Konoha," Ino said slowly. "We consider you a guest for the time being, not a prisoner, and when we have guests, they are always watched. That is just the way of a ninja village. Even the Shinobi who live here are not free agents. It is a military base. To live here is to live for this village, to carry out missions as a soldier of this village, and to protect the people of this village. We believe in this bond."

"As a guest," Chouji said, "there are certain things about the operations of this village and its Shinobi that you will never have access to."

Lucia nodded. "I see. That is to be expected. I understand fully. What of my children?"

"That is where the Jounin disagree the most," Ino said. "At least one of them is Itachi Uchiha's child, no dispute there, and we have decided to treat them both as such. We respect and understand that because of that legacy, they have a heritage here, a heritage that goes back to the founding of this village. Naruto made it very clear why we can't deny that legacy."

"It will be up to them," Chouji said, "whether they want to be acknowledged as a part of this village or strictly as your children. It has to be a choice, and you should understand what it means. If your son and daughter train to be ninjas, and especially if they succeed, they will become part of Konoha. Shinobi secrets are not given out casually. To be a Shinobi of the Leaf is to belong to the Leaf forever. That's not to say they can never physically leave the village, or that we would come between you in how you raise them, but as Leaf Shinobi, they will always be part of Konoha, and expected to put the village first…for life. The secret ways of ninja cannot be entrusted without that understanding. It is a choice that is also an obligation." Chouji paused and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"What this means for you is that, as a guest, if you ever leave here, it will be without your children."

It was what she had expected, but Lucia felt sick with heartache at the possibility that she should be severed from her children. It was necessary, but it was hard to hear aloud. She closed her eyes, saying nothing less her emotions become too obvious.

My babies…

But, of course, they would not be forever. Children grew up. It would happen whatever choices she made. Itachi was almost twelve. She was already starting to see the onset of adolescence in him. As much as she wanted to hold onto him as her boy, it was impossible. In bringing them here there was a risk of losing them, of a rift forming between herself and her children that one day she would not be able to reach across. But that had been a very real possibility the moment she had chosen to conceive a child by a Shinobi. That she had chosen Itachi Uchiha was an arrangement of fate as much as anything else. Even so, it was *just* a risk.

"I understand," she said after she had composed herself. She could not let herself be intimidated. The ninja here spoke of loyalty to the village as a foregone certainty, as if there was no other choice except to obey. She did not believe that. What her children would do had always been the greatest unknown of her gamble, but for the time being, there was no reason to be alarmed.

"Forgive me for asking," Ino said. "But why would you want your children to become Shinobi? It is a hard life. I can't imagine what a wreck I'll be sending my own baby to Academy." She looked lovingly at the face of her child. The emotion on her face was one Lucia remembered well, and felt every time she looked at her own children.

"To worry is a parent's right," she replied. "It would be so no matter where we lived or what they grew up to be. Since we have come to live here, I think it is best for them to become a part of this village.

We cannot leave, and I would not have them be outcasts. I know it is dangerous, but no more so than if we had not come here."

"I suppose you must understand the dangers," Ino said, "seeing as you and Itachi Uchiha…" She swallowed.

"I suppose you want to know about it."

There was a moment of awkward silence.

Itachi Uchiha. Lucia closed her eyes. It was an effort not to let memory sweep her backward. Nine years felt like nothing. She had felt like she was drowning in remembrance since entering these lands.

" *Is this what you want?"* She remembered she had asked him calmly, feeling nothing at all like calm.

" *Yes."*

She remembered too the chill of the windowsill on her bare shoulder, the snow falling soft and silent beyond the glass, blanketing the world outside in an alien stillness of another world.

There had been no emotion on his face, the face that was now her child's, but she had felt the resonance of his feelings clearly, had understood them instinctually. It was this that had confused her, had thrown her into a chaos of self-loathing and self-doubt, and turned her unwillingly (or willingly?) into his instrument.

" *It's not real,"* she had said to him. She had said it without passion, and had meant to be understood dispassionately.

He had closed his eyes, stood still for a moment. He had approached her, touched her shoulder, ran his hand down her arm where the robe had slipped in a suggestive way she recognized. It startled her, but he only smiled in her ear.

" *Nothing is."*

He had meant that too.

It was the first time in his company she had felt truly frightened.

Even now, sitting across from Ino and Chouji, she could not fully explain what had transpired during those weeks, or why. She could not say it was a painful experience. She could not say it was a pleasurable experience. The lens with which she viewed it had been warped beyond her power to straighten. That such beautiful children had come of such a riddle was a mystery to her as great as the existence of God.

"Itachi and I were lovers of circumstance," she said finally. "Our paths crossed. It was a tryst, or a series of trysts, driven by something that is difficult for me to define, even now. But then, I have made many choices in life where victory and regret felt the same."

Ino was staring at her with a stricken look on her face. "That's…"

"Very like the thinking of many Shinobi," Chouji interrupted, and settled his wife by placing a large, warm hand on her knee. Ino turned her face toward her baby, but the appalled look had not completely vanished from her expression. Lucia supposed that to this happy couple, what she had just described must have sounded vaguely like an admittance of a masochistic relationship, or a meaningless one.

It depended what they assumed was true about Itachi. It was the same for her, and in that light, she didn't know how to explain it. The appearance was different than the reality, but perhaps appearances was all there was. Even he had said so. In that light, nothing she remembered could be trusted.

"There's one other thing we were asked to tell you," Chouji told her, perhaps as a way to change the direction of the conversation, perhaps for some other reason. "As Hokage, Naruto would like you and your family to come to watch his fight with Sasuke."

"They are going to fight?" she asked, startled out of her momentary gloom. From the Hokage's reaction to her son upon her arrival to Konoha, she had thought the Hokage partial to the Uchiha. But perhaps it was not that kind of fight.

"Yep," Chouji said. "Anyway, Naruto specifically requested that you come."

"Specifically?"

Chouji nodded. "You and your children."

This puzzled Lucia exceedingly. She did not quite have a handle on the Hokage yet. From the rumors, she had expected someone intimidating, perhaps austere, even threatening, and been pleasantly surprised that he was none of those things. She had also expected someone deviously brilliant, but from their first meeting, it had occurred to her that he might be an idiot. Now she wasn't so sure. Perhaps with this Hokage, it was best not to have expectations that might prove incorrect.

"All right," she said. "I will be there."

As it turned out, the ninja Academy wasn't hard to find.

Itachi knew they were close when they passed a class of school children younger than Rina lining up to throw knives at targets made of bunched hay or wood. Rina tugged on his sleeve to point out Tenten, smiling as she demonstrated a toss that spun a short knife end over end at an alarming speed to plunge solidly into a log forty meters away.

"Maybe we should ask her where Iruka is," Rina suggested. "She's nice."

"I don't want to interrupt the lesson," Itachi replied. He stared in amazement as a child probably four years his junior imitated

Tenten's throw with not one knife, but two. His gaze lingered as he led Rina away. "I'm sure we can find him."

Rina shrugged and followed him. The path led adjacent to the practice yard until it wrapped around one side of the schoolhouse and was obscured by a row of trees. Itachi and Rina ducked under the boughs of a maple and emerged on a paved road leading straight toward an entrance with stairs and a set of double doors.

"It's pretty here," Rina said.

Itachi looked around. Trees lined either side of the path, the trunks climbing into the sky and the twisted boughs forming a partial canopy overhead. The shadows of the branches and leaves dappled the path with spots of shade and sunlight. Plush grass on either side of the pathway made the road almost like a sheltered glen.

He was about to reply that it was indeed pretty when two students pushed open the double doors from the other side. They stopped upon seeing them, a boy and girl, both roughly his own age. Itachi stopped too, staring at them without saying anything.

He sized up the boy, noting brown hair, dark eyes, a short-sleeved red shirt and muscles just starting to develop. He had an intense, aggressive expression that Itachi had never confronted in a peer before, not even in kids that disliked him in his previous school. It set him back, but although part of him wanted to provoke this kid just to see what he would do (probably kill him, he realized abstractedly), Itachi found his attention sliding to the girl. She was a slim, pale figure with short, light brown hair and warm brown eyes the color of caramel. Itachi's eyes trailed to the black leather boots that covered her shins to the knee. He tried to recall when girls his age had gotten such long legs. All at once, he couldn't think.

"Who are you?" It was the boy that had spoken

"Huh?" He blinked to chase away a sensation like tiny lights exploding in his skull just behind his eyes.

"I've never seen you before," the boy said. "Who are you?"

"Itachi."

"Like Itachi Uchiha?"

Itachi didn't know what to say. "Yeah."

The boy made a sound in his throat that sounded like a scoff.

"Do you know him?" Itachi asked.

" *What* ?" His face twisted, lip curling and eyebrows crunching in an expression of jeering incredulity.

Itachi knew immediately that he had just said something stupid. *Of course they know* of *him,* he thought abstractedly. *He's a famous murderer* . And he was long dead, so how would this kid know him? He fumbled for more information, something he could use to rephrase his question, and realized in that moment how much he *didn't* know about his father, or himself, or this place.

"We're looking for Iruka," he said instead.

The boy scowled. He didn't answer.

The girl glanced at her companion with a softness in her eyes that Itachi recognized as the sort of understanding a person developed for someone they had known a long time, especially someone with loud or obvious flaws.

"Iruka is on the first floor," she said, and pointed toward the door from which they had come. "We saw him just a minute ago." In addition to the warmth in her eyes, her voice also had a clarity to it that Itachi found appealing. He decided he liked her face. He found himself smiling at her and unable to stop.

"Thanks," he said, and grinned broadly enough to show teeth.

She smiled back.

He strode forward, suddenly having to move. He walked as if his feet itched. It was an effort not to run. As he neared the girl, his gait took on a sauntering stroll. Rina followed him, trotting two steps for his every stride. "Maybe I'll see you," he said coolly as he passed.

"Maybe."

The boy's face had stiffened like a rock, his scowl deepening to a dark, ugly frown. Itachi avoided his eyes, sensitive to a sudden blossoming of deep dislike between them, though they were strangers. He wasn't sure what had just happened.

When he and Rina pushed passed the double doors he had to stop in the hallway. His heart was beating like a drum and he hadn't done any running or climbing or fighting or anything.

Rina was standing there looking at him.

"What?" he demanded.

"I didn't say anything!"

"Okay," he said. "Sorry." His thoughts hummed like there were bees in his head. He pushed a palm at the place between his eyes that seemed to be spinning until it stopped. "I don't know what that was about," he said, blinking to clear his vision. "Let's go?"

She nodded.

They walked straight and looked down every intersecting hallway they crossed until they saw a man pulling his head out of a classroom doorway. He wore a green vest like many of the ninjas Itachi had seen in the village. He also had a scar on his nose.

"Iruka?" Itachi called.

The man looked up and approached them with a quick pace that lengthened by the stride.

"Hey," he said. His eyes widened as he took them in. "You must be Itachi. And Rina?"

"Yeah." Itachi felt nervous again. It was as if the wave that had carried him high a moment ago had passed and left him dry among the shoals. "Were you expecting us?"

"No," Iruka said, and waved for them to follow him further down the hall. "No, no. It's just that I was talking to Naruto not ten minutes ago about you." He stared at them for a moment. Itachi wondered what he saw. "Let's go to my office, shall we?"

Itachi and Rina followed Iruka down the main corridor to the far back corner of the building. Iruka opened the door and gestured for the pair of them to enter ahead of him. Itachi glanced around at the teacher's desk and the wall scrolls and books piled on a shelf in the corner as he entered. It was a bit of a cluttered space without being messy. A giant window on the far wall looked out onto the grassy lawns of the school grounds.

"Have a seat," Iruka said. Itachi took the far chair nearest the window. Rina sat demurely on the edge the chair next to him, crossing her legs at the ankle and straightening her back as if she were being interviewed. Maybe they were. Itachi sat up straighter, mimicking his sister, as Iruka took his seat on the other side of the desk across from them both. "I know you've traveled a long way," he said. "I thought you might need a few days to get adjusted. I was planning to visit you later this week, but here you are. What can I do for you?"

"We want to know if we can join the Academy," Itachi said.

"You want to join?" He sounded a little surprised. "I thought you might ask first what it is was…" He peered at Itachi thoughtfully.

Itachi swallowed. This was the part where he had to convince Iruka that he really wanted to join, that his desire wasn't just an idea or a lark, but something he wanted and understood the implications of.

"I want to learn how to be a ninja, like my father, or…" He flushed at Iruka's incredulous expression, "at least ask about it. I mean, not like my father exactly, but a good..." Knowing he could not answer questions about his father, he flushed and changed directions. "I know how behind I am, and I know I'm an outsider, and that it may not be allowed, but Chouji—Akimichi?—He said I should ask you, and…" He was babbling like a little kid. The image of the eight year old in Tenten's class flashed in his mind. He took a deep breath. "I just want a chance."

"You really do want to join the Academy." Itachi leaned back and scratched his head around the plated headband tied across his forehead.

"Is it allowed?" Itachi asked.

Iruka didn't say anything for a moment. Itachi had the impression that Iruka was one of those teachers who was kind, and who he liked kids, but was also strict when it came to rules and regulations. "Joining the Academy isn't like other schools," he said at last. "And it's not as simple as training to do the things ninjas do. You have to know what it means. If you don't, I really don't think it's the best choice for you."

"I know," Itachi said hurriedly. "I mean, I talked to the Akimichis already. I know it's dangerous and difficult. I know I can get killed, and I know that I'm way behind too. But if you'll let me, I still want to do it."

Iruka smiled at him. "Well, you've got grit. That's good, but it's not quite what I meant when I said you need to know what it means to be a Shinobi. Being a Leaf Shinobi means being a soldier for Konoha. It is military training. More importantly, it is secretive military training exclusive to this country. Do you understand?"

"Yeah." Itachi did understand. "Ninja training is for people who live in this country. And I'm an outsider."

"Well… yes. Right now you are."

He countered quickly. "So I could become a Shinobi if I became a citizen of the Leaf?"

Iruka blinked. "You're a perceptive kid. That's smart, and mostly right, but don't be too hasty. You have to understand fully what being a Shinobi means. To be a Shinobi of the Leaf is to put the Leaf first. Becoming a Shinobi is a lifelong commitment to Konoha, and a serious thing even for those born here. If you want to be a Shinobi, you will be beholden to the village. Once you do it, you can never go back."

Itachi was silent for a moment, thinking this through.

"There are many people living in this village who do not become Shinobi. What I want you to understand it that it is not your only option. You see, if you train as a Leaf ninja, you would belong to us. Although your mother will be responsible for you on a personal level, when it comes to your duties, you would serve the village first. That can be hard. Sometimes Shinobi are required to keep secrets from their families, and if your mother ever decided to leave this place, you couldn't go with her."

Itachi swallowed. Iruka was not making a threat. In fact, Itachi did not detect anything remotely disquieting about the man. He clearly just wanted Itachi to understand the full consequences of what he was asking for.

"Right," Itachi said. "But if I don't make this commitment to the village, I'll always be an outsider. I mean, Rina and me both. We'll always be treated like foreigners, and we'll be weaker than everybody here, and dependent on their protection, even though we're not one of them."

Iruka didn't say anything.

Itachi thought hard. He recalled the way that boy had looked at him, the challenge he felt in his stare, and the way he had said " *what* ?" He thought of the girl too, and about how absolutely off limits *everything* would be in a place like this if he *didn't* adapt. He would never make friends if he couldn't keep up. Maybe that was okay right now, when he was just a child, when he was still relying on his mother to take care of him, but some day it wouldn't do, and that day was soon. Maybe it had already passed. He didn't want to depend on his mother. *He* wanted to take care of *her* .

He thought about the coin purse in his pocket, and how light it was now to what it had been. He recalled the look on his mother's face—cold and numb—when she had pawned her mother's antique jewelry to fill that purse and finance their flight to this place. They had lost so much—family, friends, security, a beautiful house, fine clothes, his guitar, Rina's piano, their first dreams…

And then it came back to him why they had left. He remembered the way Gehard had grabbed his mother about the throat, pulled her body taut, made her gasp to breathe.

She likes it.

Itachi's hands clenched. That was the first time he had seen it, the way Gehard treated her, but he knew it wasn't the only time, had known for years that something just like that happened *every* time the black vase was in the window. He remembered his mother's face when Gehard had kissed her while crushing her throat—strong, enduring—until he told her *she liked it* . Then her face had broken. He was sure of that now.

He remembered too the sound Gehard's hand had made when it struck Rina's cheek. The way Rina had just stopped speaking had made him almost as angry as when Gehard had cuffed his mother across the face. That someone should have the power to stop his sister's voice was wrong.

That could never be home again. Never.

"Are you all right?" Iruka asked.

"Itachi?" Rina was looking at him anxiously.

Itachi's jaw hurt. He must have been clenching it.

Last night, his mother had said that Gehard would come looking for them.

Gehard had knocked him down so easily. He recalled the grasping feeling of not being able to breathe, the pain in his ribs, the cold ceramic floor tiles against his cheek, and the absolute shock and disempowerment that accompanied it. Even just a few months training in this place, he felt, and someone like Gehard wouldn't be able to do that to him.

His real father had been a Shinobi. He didn't understand why his mother had been with such a person, or why she had been with Gehard for that matter, but he didn't care. His real father had been a Shinobi. His real father was dead, but he had a living uncle who was a Shinobi now, an uncle who wouldn't look at him long enough to acknowledge that he was real, but an uncle who was alive all the same. He wanted to exist in this place. He wanted something of his heritage, something that wasn't Gehard, something that was *him* . He wanted the truth about his father too, however ugly it might be, and he knew that as long as he was an outsider, he would never get it.

"I'm staying here," he said. His head was throbbing. "No matter what happens, I'm staying here, so… I want to be a Shinobi."

Rina was looking at him with wide, fearful eyes.

"Are you sure?" Iruka said. "Are you really sure? You understand?" He sounded grave, but there was a look in his eye that seemed to smile.

"To give my life to the village. Yes."

Rina swiveled in her chair, sitting up so stiffly her back arched. "I want to be a Shinobi of the Leaf too!" she exclaimed. "Please take me too!" Her face was set at its most stubborn and determined.

Iruka smiled at them both. "Okay. Okay. We'll induct you formally tomorrow, but as of this minute then, you can consider yourselves bound to Konoha. The Hokage is your leader, but you'll be given official directions by Jounin and Chuunin and even Genin now and again. If you're given an official order, you must follow it. You are sure you understand?"

They both nodded.

"Under oath, do you accept?"

They nodded again.

"Well, I will see about classes for both of you then. Rina, you are easy enough, but Itachi, if you start with the other students your age, you will be outclassed in every category."

"That's okay," he said.

"But do you want to be with people your age? I can put you with younger students. It's up to you."

"No," he said, thinking again of that girl. "I'll catch up." He might look like a fool sometimes, but he would feel like a fool all the time in a class with eight year olds.

"I'm going to give both of you some standard textbooks on Shinobi rules and basic jutsus and chakra control," Iruka said, and reached behind him to thumb through the volumes stacked on a shelf. "Ah. Here they are. These are overviews, not manuals on how to perform jutsus, but the faster you acquaint yourself with the concepts every

Shinobi in training knows, the quicker you will be able to catch up. Rina, I hope the reading isn't too difficult for a girl your age."

"Rina's a good reader," Itachi advocated for his sister. He was thankful quite suddenly of the advanced schooling they had already had from the schools his mother had sent them to at great expense.

"One more thing," Iruka said. "There is a match tonight between Naruto and Sasuke. I know that your mother is to be invited. I think the pair of you would learn a lot by coming as well. Do you think you can be there?"

Itachi gaped. A match between the Hokage and his uncle? "Yeah."

Iruka handed them the textbooks. "Study as much as you can before you come. You'll get more out of it."

The book in his hands felt heavy, but its familiarity gave him confidence. In his old school, he was used to reading a lot. Reading would be the easy part. He would catch up on that quickly. It was everything else that worried him, but he knew he couldn't let himself think about it as a mountain. He had to think about it like a challenge. He was behind, so he would just have to work harder than everyone else.

Uchiha are special.

He hoped it was true, and that whatever it was about the Uchiha that was so special, he had inherited it from his father.

TBC

Please review! Substantial comments heartily solicited! This fic may seem slow, but it's actually moving pretty quickly for the kind of story it is. There's a lot being developed in all the details. I'd like to know what was noticed (or not, lol) and enjoyed. All comments are

welcome. Praises are gushed over. Criticisms are listened-to (but don't make me cry T_T).

Chapter 5

Warnings : This fanfic is for 16+ readers (rated M). It contains sexual references , mature themes (including sado-masochism...described vaguely but not "shown"), some violence, a very little bit of swearing, and other material. , This fic FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES for this site so please do not report it as MA. There are no explicit sex scenes. All such scenes "cut off" before anything happens. Violence is typical for a story about ninjas. There isn't anything extremely disturbing described in any detail.

Questions and Answers:

Q: Will Itachi (Uchiha) make an appearance? A: Yes. In the past.

Q: Is Naruto in love with Sasuke? A: No. But he loves him as friend and almost family.

Q: Why is there a public match between Sasuke and the Hokage? Wouldn't this make Naruto seem weak in the eyes of the villagers if he lost? A: No. It is a handicapped sporting event.

Q: How canon is your AU? A: As canon as it can be until I write a direct contradiction and Kishimoto moves on without me. I am caught up with the manga. If at some point I deviate from the manga, I will announce it in the author's notes.

Q: I expect a totally awesome Naruto-Sasuke spar. Will you be 'bringing out the big guns,' so to speak? A: No "big guns" because it is a handicapped event, but I tried for you! I hope it is fun.

Q: Why is Itachi addressing various strangers (Iruka) by their respective first names while being overly polite at other points? A: Uh… Author oversight? Because I was too lazy to look up Iruka's last name… (sorry)

Q: Does Lucia have a secret history? A: Yes.

To everyone who reviewed: Thank you very much!

I spent November writing a novel for Nanowrimo and wrote this the first week of December. I was not able to find a beta for the chapter, and I'm regrettably not always the best judge of my own work. If you are reading, PLEASE review? I spend a lot of time on this (seriously). I'm enjoying this story because it is a huge challenge, but I don't really know if I'm getting it across the way I intend. The stats are a little strange. Lots of favorites and alerts, but hits drop by halves chapter to chapter and the number of reviews is grossly disproportionate to alerts—so I don't know if people are actually reading, or continuing to read. Perhaps the beginning is too boring? Let me know!

White Rain

Chapter 5

By Zapenstap

Rina had buried her nose in the text book Iruka Umino had given them and almost ran into Itachi when he stopped at the market.

She glared up at him. "Why'd you stop?"

"Supplies," Itachi explained, and pulled his mother's money purse from his pocket. "Mom asked us to get some things before we came home, remember?"

"Oh." She flipped back through the pages and held it open to a spread outlining what appeared to be a number of tools and weapons. "We should see if we can find ninja gear," she said, turning the book around and showing him the pages with labeled pictures.

Itachi scanned the recommended items: Soft-soled shoes, kunai knives, shuriken, flash bombs, weapons pouch...It went on and on. "House stuff first," he said. "I don't know if we can afford all that, and

I don't know what is most important. For the time being, we might have to borrow from the school, or on credit."

He counted out the coins they had left in his hand and did some quick calculations. Like his mother, Itachi had been born with a good head for numbers. He'd been being raised by bankers, and his studies had taught him a fair understanding of market principles. The currency in this country—Ryou—was different than at home, but he had paid close attention to how much things cost when they crossed the border to get a handle on prices. He thought they had enough for what he hoped to buy, but he planned to barter as if they had less.

Itachi was feeling nervous about Ninja Academy, so this was a welcome challenge. He knew how to trade. Haggling and negotiation was a rite of passage in his old school, especially among boys whose parents expected them to start learning the family business around age thirteen or fourteen.

He hashed out a plan with Rina, and they began to look for what they needed. The shopping district sprawled several streets, and like many village markets, prices were never as set as the paper they were printed on. As for tactics, in a village this small, Itachi thought it best to avoid playing the hapless waif card, but he did intend to play up on the limit of their funds.

Itachi didn't waste time. With Rina in tow, he started with the most expensive, necessary items. When prices could not be negotiated as low as he wanted, he asked about giveaways: a small item tossed in free with a larger one, or a discounted item tossed in on credit if he promised to pay later and shop at that stand again. Sometimes he pretended to be interested in something of lesser quality, and then allowed the merchant to up-sell him on a better piece for a comparatively lower price. Sometimes he would refuse a purchase all together if it didn't meet his requirements, or failed to match the negotiations of a competitor. A few times he allowed Rina to "pick out" her favorite among choices. Naturally, she always chose the best, and upon learning the price, he would regretfully inform her that they couldn't afford it. Rina played the adorable, crestfallen child

splendidly, and the merchants would chuckle and haggle a little lower just to see her smile.

Itachi knew he wasn't fooling anybody, of course, but that didn't matter. Contrary to what many people believed, merchants were not put off by negotiations. They expected it. A time or two he even thought he caught a smile on their faces. He hoped it meant he had earned their respect. Remembering one of his mother's most important rules, he made it a point to learn the names of all the merchants, especially in successful transactions: business is business, but every human interaction is a relationship first. In the long run, becoming a valued customer was more beneficial than simply buying something. After all, now that they lived here, they would likely need to return to the store again and the better the relationship with the store owner, the more credit they would have with which to bargain.

Around noon, both he and Rina were loaded down with bags and decided to call it quits. Before going home, he elected to treat them both to lunch in town. He let Rina choose where they were going to eat.

"Just pick someplace affordable," he mumbled.

Rina pointed out a ramen shop—a little hut with stools facing a counter behind a row of half curtains cut from great squares of white cloth. He and Rina ducked under the curtains and sat down on a pair of stools side by side. Itachi ordered two bowls of ramen and looked grimly into the purse where the remaining coins made a much quieter clinking sound than they had before shopping.

"This is interesting," Rina said, hoisting the text book back out of her shopping bag and laying it on the countertop. She had continued reading while watching their purchases as he bartered. She flipped to the first chapter and showed him an outline of human bodies, male and female, with swirls and arrows pointing to what looked like nodules spaced along the limbs, torso, neck, and head. "It explains chakra," she summarized, "and different kinds of jutsu, and different

kinds of ninja. There are three ranks. And a girl ninja is called a Kunoichi!" She smiled.

"Do you think Kunoichi are as strong as other ninja?" Itachi teased her.

She gave him a frosty stare as if to say *of course they are* , and then turned her nose up at him. She sat primly with her ankles crossed at the edge of her stool, staring coolly at the back wall of the ramen shop. Itachi tried to imagine his sister displaying this level of polite huffiness in ninja combat gear and failed. He wondered if all ninja, especially Kunoichi, were hand-to-hand fighters, or if the different kinds of jutsu Rina discovered in the text allowed for other abilities more suited to her nature. He really just couldn't imagine her physically hitting anyone—not effectively anyway.

"Did I hear you ask if Kunoichi are strong?" the chef said to them as he served up two ramen bowls with a flourish. He had a laughing face, his eyes squinted slits from so much smiling. "You're about to find out! Here comes Sakura Haruno, undoubtedly the strongest Kunoichi in the village. She looks to be in a temper too." He put a finger over his lips and winked at them. "If she asks, I am not here!"

With that, he dropped out of sight behind the bar.

Itachi turned just in time to see a woman charging up to the stand.

"NARUTO!"

She flung the curtains aside stared thunderously at the empty stools on either side of Itachi and Rina.

Itachi's mouth parted in surprise. It was the same woman who had been with his uncle Sasuke yesterday. By how close they stood to each other, he had assumed she was his girlfriend.

"He's not here either?" She made a sound rich with exasperation, eyes flashing and shoulders tensing as she swept a glance over the

empty stools. When she saw Itachi, her face registered recognition. The rage that had made a murderous mask out of her otherwise pretty features vanished completely, chased away by startlement.

"Oh, it's you," she said. He could tell she was just surprised to see him, and she blushed when she heard herself. She cleared her throat, and when she spoke again, she made eye contact, her tone was a good deal warmer. "How are you?"

"Nice to see you again," he said.

Rina smiled at Sakura. "You're a Kunoichi?" Itachi had the impression that Rina was impressed, but more by the *concept* of female ninja and whatever she had read in that book than Sakura herself. She had probably got it into her head to hawk the Kunoichi in the village to see if the things she read about were true. So she could imitate them, of course.

Sakura smiled back. "That's right." She looked around a little uncertainly. "I'd like to talk to you both," she said apologetically, "but I'm a bit in a hurry. I'm looking for Naruto…er, the Hokage. He's in such…!" She flushed, catching herself. "Have you seen him?"

"Is he in trouble?" Rina asked. Itachi lightly shook his head in warning, eyeing his sister askance. She just looked at him. "What? Mama says that when men are in trouble, they shouldn't run away, especially from women. It only comes back harder!"

Itachi made a face at her. Sakura stared at Rina with startled, blue-green eyes that sparkled. Then she laughed. "Well, it's coming back to him this time all right!" She landed a fist on the counter top with such a heavy thump that the entire shop wobbled. When she lifted her hand, Itachi saw that the force of the slam had left an indent on the surface. Itachi stared at the running cracks with alarm. Sakura didn't seem to notice. "When I get my hands on him, he's going to have to *hobble* to the arena."

"Are you coming to the match?" Itachi asked, partly out of curiosity but mostly out of the hope that distracting her might calm her down. He understood now why the ramen chef was crouching under the counter. "Between Naruto and my uncle Sasuke?"

"Your uncle Sasuke," Sakura repeated quietly to herself. Itachi froze, immediately pierced by the knowledge that he had said something he should have not have said. Sakura's face had an odd, drifting look to it, as if she were thinking too many things and feeling too many things to have a proper reaction. She didn't seem to realize it was noticeable either. He shouldn't have said "uncle." She wasn't ready for it, or Sasuke wasn't, at least. After a moment, Sakura turned sad eyes on him. "Yes, I'm going. In fact, I'm mediating. You know, Sasuke is…" She took a deep breath. Abruptly, an annoyed look crossed her face. She was changeable, Itachi decided. Like a tempest, her emotions came over her like a storm and dissipated just as quickly. He watched her expression alter from sad to thoughtful to annoyed to furious in the space of three heartbeats. It was like roulette.

Her reaction interested him because he wanted to know how she felt about all of this, but also because something about her way of processing complex feelings seemed familiar somehow. He couldn't quite place it. He wouldn't call it moodiness. Rina was moody. Rina could be adorably chipper all day and then depressingly gloomy for absolutely no reason, but Rina didn't have flashes of temper. Sakura's emotions were charged, deliberate, and focused on something particular.

He decided after a moment of thought that she was more like his mother. His mother's fits of emotion were also purposeful, and passionate, but different than Sakura's because they were so rare. Her outbursts were not obvious to anyone who didn't know her privately. Most people thought his mother had tight control of herself all of the time, but she didn't. When she did lose it, it was suddenly, and inconveniently, and until she fully expressed herself, she could swing dangerously between extremes of cold ice and raging heat.

Sakura reminded him of that, only she was not secretive about it, and seemed let her emotions out freely exactly as she felt them rather than bottling them up until they burst.

Whatever internal argument raged inside Sakura's head right now, it was making her angry, either at Sasuke or herself, he guessed.

He watched as Sakura's eyes narrowed and her hands clenched into fists that shook. "Ooh!" she fumed. "I can't believe them! They both act like this fight is the only important thing in the universe, and now here *you* are, and I'm caught between them dealing with *everything* , and it's so…. Gah! They are both absurd! Men!"

Rina nodded over her ramen as if she had loads of dating experience and knew precisely what Sakura meant.

"Why are they fighting?" Itachi asked. With his mother, he found that questions were often a good way of redirecting strong feelings.

Sakura blinked. "Huh?"

"The Hokage and Sasuke. What are they fighting about?"

"Oh," she said, and just like that, she switched tracks; all her rage vanished. "Nothing. They aren't fighting. Well, not any more than usual. The match is just for sport. Naruto thinks it's healthy for the village."

"How?" Itachi asked, again to distract her, but also because it interested him how the village was run. He could see how regular sporting events could bring in a lot of money, especially if people had to pay to get in, but something told him that wasn't what Sakura meant.

She tapped her chin with a gloved finger, pausing as if thinking out how to best explain. "Well, with the world mostly at peace, the Hokage feels that regulated matches are the best way of encouraging competition to keep up the strength of the village. You

see, if we don't have *something* to keep ninja from getting… antsy, they'll start picking unnecessary battles to test their skills. So we have two kinds of matches regularly. We have Drawings, where interested competitors submit their names to facilitator and lots are drawn, and we have Challenges, where any competitor can challenge any other competitor."

"Which is it this time?"

"Neither," she said. "Today's fight is an exhibition match. Every once in awhile, Naruto schedules exhibition matches to inspire the generation in training and to promote sportsmanship. It's not always Naruto and Sasuke, but their matches always attract the biggest turnout."

"How is an exhibition different from a challenge?"

"Exhibitions are more for show," Sakura said. "They can only be fought between competitors who already acknowledge each other. They can do some wild stuff for the crowd, but the match itself is a handicap. They do that to keep it interesting, and also to keep it from getting out of control."

"Isn't that predictable?"

"Not really. Depending on the handicap, the fight turns out differently. For example, when Sasuke and Naruto fight, sometimes Naruto has an advantage and sometimes Sasuke does. It depends on the rules for that match. This one is handicapped practically to Chuunin level. But the advantages don't always matter. Strategy is more important. For that reason, there's lots of betting. That alone has almost become an industry."

She grimaced, as if Konoha making its money on gambling wasn't the most savory of thoughts, but one she had to accept. Itachi wondered if the village was strapped for money during these times of peace. He could guess at lots of little requests ninja might receive, but maybe not so many big ones. He could imagine that peace

would be problematic for a militant society. Still, gambling had to be better than war.

"I'm going to be a Kunoichi!" Rina declared suddenly, as if this exactly followed along the thread of conversation. Itachi could tell by her face that she was just bursting to make this announcement. He supposed she had been mulling it over since they came away from the school. She sat very straight on her seat with their school's primary textbook on her lap, kicking her legs against the rung of the stool. Something she had read must have *really* excited her.

Sakura blinked at Itachi's sister. "You are?"

"We joined the Academy this morning!"

Sakura stared. "You did?" A succession of thoughts crossed her face like butterflies.

She's thinking how she's going to tell Sasuke , he thought. It was just a guess, but given that she seemed so focused on him and Naruto, and since he knew Naruto at least already knew, it seemed like a logical leap. From her expression, he didn't think Sasuke was going to like this news. It disheartened him.

"The ramen man said you are strong," Rina said. "Are you strong?"

Itachi was glad for Rina's silly questions. It gave him a chance to think. He didn't know all the facts, but he knew his presence here caused Sasuke grief. Even so, he felt a connection between them, something genetic that couldn't be explained. Only now he was just putting a burden on Sakura too. He didn't want it like this. What he wanted was for everything to be easy. But of course, it couldn't be. He tried not to think about it.

Thankfully, Rina's question caused Sakura to laugh. "Well, I like to think so! But you can always work on it."

The laughter lasted only a moment, and then the worry came right back to her face. "I'm sorry, guys, but I really have to find Naruto. And Sasuke too." She put a hand to her temple as if it throbbed. "Itachi, about Sasuke's reaction to you yesterday..."

"It's okay," he said hastily.

She bit her lip as she looked at him, as if she didn't quite believe it.

"I mean I understand," Itachi said. "It's fine. I'm all right." He was. He wished he didn't *have* to be all right with it, but it was just easier being all right with things like that, and better than putting the burden to make it right on other people. It was like glossing over Gehard's treatment of his mother for Rina's sake, or pretending for his mother that he didn't know or understand why her relationship with Gehard was the way it was. It was just easier to pretend that everything was fine. He could handle his own emotions. His mother and sister had problems enough. It was the same with Sasuke.

"Well," Sakura said uncertainly. "I know it's got to be hard coming to a new place, and having something like that happen isn't the most welcoming thing." She sighed. "Maybe just give him a bit of time? It's been rough for him and I think it is just a little much all at once, but he might come around."

"Okay," he agreed, encouraged that she called his bluff and offered something suitable to hope in: Time. "I hope so. I mean, I think I'd like to get to know him, but I don't want to be a bother. You can tell him I said that. If you want." He didn't want to sound too eager.

She smiled wanly. "I hope so. So you're sure I'll see you two at the match?"

"I think so," Itachi told her.

"Great!" She smiled again before ducking out of the ramen shop the way she had come.

"That was a little weird," Itachi told Rina.

She nodded, but didn't comment, following Sakura's back with eyes full of thought.

"Whew!" the chef said, rising out of his crouch as soon as Sakura had gone. Itachi and Rina rotated on their stools to face him. "The Hokage *was* here," he said quietly, "but I don't want to be the one to tell her! I was afraid she'd break my new countertop." He sighed at the warped boards where Sakura's fist had crashed. Something about his face gave Itachi the impression that he considered the impact she had left to be mild. He raised his eyebrows in question. "Don't mess with that one!" the chef warned. "She trained with the great Lady Tsunade. "

Itachi didn't know who that was so he didn't say anything.

"So you're Uchiha's nephew?" the chef said. "I should have known! I don't suppose you've got a Sharingan?"

"A what?" Itachi asked.

The ramen chef chuckled. "Guess not."

"What is a Sharingan?" Itachi asked curiously.

"A doujutsu," the chef replied. "It has to do with the eyes. The Sharingan is one of the Leaf village's most famous doujustu. It's a genetic trait passed down in the Uchiha family. Itachi Uchiha had it. So does Sasuke."

Itachi remembered the change in his uncle's eyes yesterday when the cornea had turned red and the pupils had taken on such a strange shape. He sat in stunned silence. "You think I might have eyes like that?" Was that why the Uchiha were special?

"I don't know," the ramen chef said, "but I wouldn't be surprised." He winked.

Itachi shared a meaningful look with Rina.

They really needed to study.

He and Rina finished eating quickly and thanked the chef. Then they gathered up their shopping bags and headed back home. By the time they walked through the front door, the Akimichis had gone and Itachi's mother was busy putting away the provisions Chouji and Ino had brought them as a house warming gift. As he watched her, he wondered what she knew, if anything, about the eye doujutsu his father's family was famous for.

"Well?" she asked when they set down the supplies.

"We joined the Academy," Itachi said, "And I bought you the stuff you wanted."

He thought he saw some strained emotion cross his mother's face, but in an instant it was gone and he doubted having seen it. Instead, she smiled at him, her luminous eyes drinking in the light as she shoved the bag of flour into their cupboards and dusted off her green skirts.

"I'm glad," she said.

"There's going to be a match between the Hokage and my uncle Sasuke," Itachi told her.

His mother nodded. "I know. "

"Can we go?"

"The Akimichis are going to take us."

"Okay." He paused, wondering if he should ask her about the Sharingan, but decided not to bring it up with her yet. He would ask better questions when he understood more. He had enough perplexing things to think about. "We're going to study then," Itachi said, and hurried up the stairs.

"My room! My room!" Rina cried on his heels, straining to beat him as he flew up the steps two at a time to the second level.

"Nope," he grinned at her. "Mine!"

He pushed open the door to his room and jumped onto the bed, kicking off his shoes and laying his head on the musty pillow that had been here for who knew how long. He stared up at the ceiling, breathing in the scents of rustic wood as his sister clambered on the bed beside him and dumped their books out on the mattress.

He picked up the volume Iruka Urimo had given them and opened to the first page. "Okay, genius," he said to his sister. "You've had a chance to skim it. Where should I start?"

She summarized the introduction for him and told him the first chapter was a waste of time and he could probably skip it. She emphasized the section with the chart and the beginning of chapter two, so that's where he started.

He read the subheading aloud. "Taijutsu, Genjutsu, and Ninjutsu: The three major ninja abilities."

Sasuke sensed Sakura coming before she arrived. When she emerged from between the trees to enter his secret training spot, the first thing he saw was the agitation on her face.

He had been in the glen since dawn, finishing his final round of training before his match and had just woken from a recuperating nap. After a light meal, a heavy work out, and a bit of sleep, he felt a great deal better than he had most of yesterday.

When Sakura appeared with that half angry, half weepy look on her face, he remembered their conversation from the day before and felt spontaneously terrible. He had been cold, he knew, and now her thoughts were whirling full of him and all *his* problems. He got up from the grass and caught her up in a hug before she could open her

mouth. His arms fully enclosed her body, meeting behind her back as he pulled her into a rough embrace.

"I'm sorry," he said in her ear. "About yesterday. If you ever doubted I loved you, it's my fault. I shouldn't…"

"I'm sorry!" she interrupted. "I'm so brash to bring it up at such a time. I knew you were overwrought! I was only thinking about myself. I should have waited."

They stared at each other in surprise. Sakura's green eyes shimmered with sincerity, and he felt his heart pound in response. Then he kissed her, or she kissed him. At any rate, they kissed. And didn't stop kissing. The kisses deepened until his breath hitched and the palpitations in his heart spread to where the blood throbbed to his fingers and toes and radiated through his chest. He could feel the flame also in Sakura, her skin hot to his touch. She whispered under her breath, a plaintive request that set his blood on fire and wiped clean all thought. He began pulling at the laces that held her leather vest in place.

An hour later, the sun was a little higher in the sky and he was back on the grass with his hands behind his head, staring at the leaves dangling from the boughs of the tree limbs crossing above the glen.

"Sasuke…" Beside him, Sakura was flushed and spent, her body heaving for breath and her skin faintly pink all over, which pleased him. Her eyes fluttered as she stared up at the circle of blue. "That wasn't what I intended at all."

Sasuke rolled on his side. His lips found her ear. He nibbled on her earlobe and gently threaded his fingers through her hair behind her head. He pulled her head forward, cradling her neck, and gently lifted her up until they were both in a sitting position.

Perspiration coated Sakura's bare skin from the waist up. Her shirt and undergarments lay in a heap with most of his clothes. She still wore a skirt, but it was eschew on her hips and pushed up so high

she might as well have been wearing nothing. If they hadn't been outside, and if it hadn't happened so suddenly, he would have undressed her completely and held her for awhile.

He held her for a little while now, pulling her against his chest and breathing in the fragrance of her hair.

"I know what we have is not perfect," he said. "I've got a lot to work through, and it's hard, and not fair, but I—"

"It's okay," she responded. She smiled at him, a sugary smile that might have been a lie but warmed him anyway.

He rested his chin on her head and closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of her and ignoring everything else. He couldn't get lost in it. Just because they were happy now didn't mean everything was fixed. He knew that. She still had a dream of having a family. He couldn't deal with the family he had. But maybe with time—a lot of time—and a lot of patience… His mind wandered away from the thought. He didn't want to dwell on it. He didn't want to think about it right now. Maybe it was better just to enjoy the happiness of the moment. In this moment, he had everything he wanted.

Sakura took a deep breath in his arms.

"I saw Itachi today," she murmured.

He stiffened inadvertently, and then remembered who she must have meant. He didn't say anything.

"He was in the ramen shop with his sister," she told him. "They're sweet kids."

Sweet kids. He closed his eyes, saw his brother's face, and opened them again. "What did they say?" he asked.

"They've joined the Ninja Academy."

He couldn't believe it. Naruto was right.

"And they're coming to the match. I thought you should know."

"Thank you for telling me," he said.

He was glad to know, though unsure what to do with the information. The boy and his sister were going to join the Academy and train to be ninja. That meant they weren't going away. They would stay here. He had hoped to think of their presence as temporary, but that was impossible now. He didn't know what to do. If they were a part of the village, he would have to deal with them at some point. He rubbed Sakura's arms from the elbow to the shoulder, staring beyond her head at the tree line. He wanted to know more, and he wanted to know nothing. He didn't want to think. Maybe that wasn't true. He didn't want to feel.

"We should get dressed," he said. "It's almost time."

The stadium was packed.

Lucia leaned forward on the bleachers to look around. The arena below was not a field as might be expected in a sporting event. It was more like a coliseum, one with a natural floor of dirt and grass and even a few trees. The walls around the fighting ring were stone and very high, giving Lucia the impression that whatever happened here, the crowd needed to keep at a distance.

The grounds were currently empty, but an excited buzz filled the bleachers. The bleachers were located in three separate house-like structures that hung from the lip of the arena walls. Lucia, her children, and the Akimichi's had prime seats in the middle set. Bodies crammed together all the way to the back rows, with a stream of people still walking up the aisle ways and filling in the spaces in the middle.

They had some of the best seats in the house, the first seats nearest the rail overlooking the arena, which she assumed were purchased by the Akimichi family. Chouji and Ino Akimichi sat on her left with

their new baby in a bassinet next to the aisle. Chouji munched quietly on a bag of chips while Ino fussed over the hood attached to the bassinet, adjusting it to shield her sleeping baby's sleeping face from the fading light of late afternoon. Rina and Itachi sat on her left, practically bouncing in their seats as they stared around at the audience and down into the stadium.

Her children had studied all afternoon, locked in Itachi's room with their ninja schoolbooks as she had worked to put the house into as much order as she could with what she had. At various points, she had heard them arguing excitedly with each other, and smiled to herself.

The things ninja could do were incredible, and it must be incredible to her children to think that not only would they get to see them, but that they could learn them as well. She had been equally fascinated at their age, though for an entirely different reason. She shivered with remembrance. Looking back on it, she supposed she had been destined to come here, not because fate had arranged it per se, but because she had longed for answers before she even understood the meaning of the questions.

Beside her, Chouji waved to a group of three ninja walking up the aisle toward them. The seats behind them were empty yet. She recognized the newcomers, and assumed they were friends of the Akimichis. She remembered the girl with the dark buns on either side of her head and the two men with her-a gangly fellow with dark, heavy eyebrows and a glassy eyed man who registered little expression as he looked straight at her-as the ones who had intercepted them before reaching the village. They were all around Chouji's age, three to four years younger than herself, which also put them in an age group with Itachi's brother and the Hokage.

As soon as they arrived, Ino rose and made quick reintroductions.

"Lucia, I don't know if you were properly introduced. This is Tenten, Neji and Lee. They escorted you to our village yesterday. Everyone, you remember Lucia and her children, Rina and Itachi."

Lucia greeted them with her thanks and remembrance. They returned her greeting in kind. Itachi waved politely without interrupting. Rina beamed. She seemed to have cheered up.

"Where's Shikamaru?" Tenten asked Chouji and Ino as the group seated themselves on the bench behind Chouji's family.

"He's sitting with Temari and her family," Chouji responded absently. "They're all together with everyone that came from other villages." He pointed to one of the other house-like structures attached to the arena wall with a potato chip pinched between two fingers, but Lucia couldn't make out anyone in particular.

"Hinata's team is still out on a mission," Ino added with a sigh. "So we're a small lot today. Sakura will be refereeing Sasuke and Naruto."

"Ha!" Chouji said. "Refereeing? More like keeping her distance. Poor Naruto, though. Sakura gives Sasuke an advantage. Hinata's been on a mission forever. Naruto won't get to suck up the praise if he wins."

"He won't have to explain a loss either," Neji said.

"Naruto isn't going to lose!" Lee objected. "No way!"

"He *could* ," Tenten said. "I know he's passionate, Lee, but seriously, it really does take more than that. Sasuke wants to win just as badly, and Naruto's at more of a disadvantage this time. No senjutsu, no exploding jutsu of any kind—which means most of his big hits are out. Sasuke can't use half of what he's capable of either, but…"

"Oh *please* ," Ino said. "I'll admit that I was rooting for Sasuke last match, but this time, with these ridiculous handicaps, there's just no way! What has Sasuke got that Naruto can't block or evade? Place your bets on Naruto!"

"Sasuke may have something new," Neji suggested. "Naruto had something new last time."

"Naruto *always* has something new!" Ino shot back. "He will this time too, and it will beat anything Sasuke's got. Naruto just has more chakra. At a certain point, with these kind of conditions, you just can't beat that."

"That's only going to help him if it goes on for too long," Tenten said. "You don't think Sasuke hasn't taken Naruto's chakra level into account? It's not all about statistics. Strategy matters too. If you strip away Naruto's stamina and mega jutsus, Sasuke tops Naruto in almost every other area. He just has to fight hard from the beginning."

"What are they going for this time?" Chouji asked. "Five and Five? Six and four?"

"Actually, I think it's a tie breaker," Tenten said.

"Five and four," Neji agreed. "They're four and four now."

Lucia listened to the argument curiously, but without opinion. She had studied ninja enough to follow the conversation, but not enough about the people involved to weigh in on the betting. It reminded her somewhat of the conversation at a premier horserace. The favorite would always be hyped by some and picked apart by others while factors such as conditions, temperament, and the strengths and weaknesses of the competitors were brought up to offset statistical expectation. At a horserace, some people always bet by patterns and statistics, with numbers and charts they could use to compare wins to losses. Other people bet on personal factors, such as how the horses in question looked in the ring that day, or who the trainers were or had been. Neither method worked consistently, but every day hundreds of people flocked to the track hoping to work out the formula that would guarantee them a livelihood made through gambling. With human fighters, and ninja especially, it could only be more difficult. As far as betting went, she was at a disadvantage.

Lucia wondered more about the handicaps of the fight. Just how strong were these ninja that limitations—extreme by the sound of it—were needed? One competitor was the Hokage, so he must be powerful. And she knew all too well about the fame of the Uchiha. Was the handicap required primarily to even the match or to ensure the safety of the spectators? Perhaps it was both. Was that what the Hokage wanted her to see?

The early beginning of dusk cast a gray light over the arena as the last late arrivals straggled into the stadium seats. A buzz of conversation filled the air, reverberating around the circular enclosure like the drone of a great hive. The sun sank just behind the outer walls, but the light of day remained, hovering in the air despite the cool shadows that shaded the benches and covered the ground.

As soon as the sun vanished, a long figure walked out into the arena. It was a girl, clearly visible in charcoal gray and rose pink. Lucia recognized her. It was Sakura, the girlfriend of Itachi's brother who had been with the Hokage at their first meeting. The young woman waved and the crowd responded with scattered cheers.

"That's Sakura," Rina whispered to Itachi. "Do you think she found them?"

"Probably," Itachi replied. Lucia looked at him inquisitively. "We ran into her earlier," he explained.

"Who do you think she wants to win?" Rina asked, as if what Sakura wished would make a difference. Lucia smiled. Rina always asked funny questions like that. At a horserace, she would be one to bet on personal factors whereas Itachi would look at the numbers and weigh the statistical probability. They were different that way. Lucia would also bet on statistics, unless she had insight not to, of course.

"I don't know," Itachi said.

Perhaps to get some space from Rina—he was getting to that age—her son got to his feet and leaned against the rail in front of their bench, staring down at the arena with eyes that didn't blink for fear of missing something. Rina remained on the bench, but her eyes were just as wide. Lucia could almost hear their thoughts whirling.

In the center of the arena, Sakura tapped a booted toe on the dirt and flashed a smile. She gestured, swinging her arm in a graceful arc, one palm open, and made a "come hither motion."

Baiting the crowd , Lucia thought.

It worked.

Without one apparent source, scattered conversation gradually merged into one drumming voice that beat out three syllables: "NA-RU-TO NA-RU-TO." It started softly, but ballooned rapidly into a thundering beat. As soon as the name became clearly understood, the one voice broke into two, an answering challenge of "SA-SU-KE SA-SU-KE" mixing at variance, but with equal strength and fervor. Hands beat rhythmically on the benches. Hundred of heels pounded the ground.

As the rhythm built to a roar, the fingers on Rina's left hand drummed the spine of her textbook like she was playing base on a piano, her little face screwed into serious consternation as she stared at Sakura with her breath held in her throat.

The crowd had worked itself into a frenzied pitch by the time a second figure emerged on the field from the far end of the stadium. The crowd roared when they saw who it was.

Sasuke walked slowly out into the open from the shadows. He was dressed differently from the day before, in black pants tucked into a pair of slender boots molded to the foot and a white shirt loose on his back with a wide collar and short sleeves. A sword hilt extended over his left shoulder, sheathed in a scabbard mounted to a harness and strapped to his chest. His forearms were covered by black leather

arm guards with metal braces protecting flesh and bone from wrist to elbow.

When he looked up, Lucia's breath caught in her throat. His expression—coldly detached, absurdly calm—reminded her of Itachi Uchiha's face. She looked swiftly at her children, not because the face reminded her of her son, but to remind herself where—or when—she was. She looked back again at Sasuke and forced herself to catalogue the differences. No lines. Younger. The sadness was there, but it was different—more like sorrow, deeply buried, rather than the almost catatonic stoniness that had been stamped into his brother's face. And the eyes were not red. Itachi always had the Sharingan activated, or almost always. She had seen him without it, late in the evening and in the mornings when he first woke, and sometimes when he was very, very relaxed. And one other time. But she always remembered him with the Sharingan. It had taken her some time to realize he could barely see without it.

The crowd's chanting resumed, reverberating wall to wall. Only now, the chant of "SA-SU-KE" overwhelmed all other cheers. A smirk crossed Sasuke's face, clearly visible from the stands.

"Oh, he's feeling *so* cocky!" Ino said.

"To think he used to be branded as a traitor," Tenten muttered, shaking her head, her arms and ankles crossed. "How fast people forget when they're being entertained."

Neji nodded. Lucia noted how close they sat beside each other, not for any particular reason, but because it was always wise to note such things. "Thanks to Naruto," Neji responded.

Tenten acknowledged this with a slow, bobbing nod.

So Sasuke had been branded a traitor and restored in no small part due to the efforts of the Hokage. She wondered about Sasuke's story, but not too deeply; she had always avoided knowing too much about that particular secret, despite having always known something.

She knew it involved his relationship with Itachi, and the murders undoubtedly, and that it was complicated, but perhaps complication —and contradiction—was typical of the Uchiha.

Things often were in old families. She knew that all too well.

From that, she also felt that Tenten was right. In theory, people talked long and deeply about how they would never forgive atrocities committed against them. They could hold on to the stupidest grudges if doing so made them feel superior, but people were often shockingly willing to "forget" true evils for reasons that had nothing to do with what was just or what was right. She supposed entertainment might be considered a reason, but at the heart of everything was money.

"Where *is* Naruto?" Chouji mumbled, munching quietly on his chips beside her. "Is he going to make a flashy entrance, do you think?"

On the field, Sasuke approached Sakura and leaned in to whisper something in her ear. His eyes flashed in the darkening light of day, glittering black like polished onyx, but framed with beautiful lashes that made even his toughened features seem somehow softer. Lucia recognized that too. Her son had those same eyes, as did his father. She could easily understand Ino's comment earlier about Sasuke's youthful popularity.

Sakura responded to Sasuke and he stepped back, crossing his arms to wait. The noise had fallen to conversation and muttering as the seconds stretched into minutes with no sign of Sasuke's competitor. Gradually, chants of NA-RU-TO began again. The call was picked up and spread like wildfire, chanted now with softer, but more urgent voices, until the stadium was almost palpitating with anticipation.

But nothing happened.

From somewhere across the stadium, one lone voice began shouting "HO-KA-GE." For awhile, the one bleating voice chanted

shrilly with robust energy, but at variance with the crowd. Then Rock Lee jumped to his feet behind them, stood on the bleachers, and joined in, screaming with such vigorous passion that heads turned.

"HO-KA-GE!"

The cry was taken up like a banner before battle. It was so infectious that Lucia's children looked at each other, grinned, and began yelling with Lee. The cry took hold like a wave, racing around the arena until "HO-KA-GE" echoed off the walls like the drumbeats of war.

On the field, a burst of smoke exploded out of thin air several feet to the left of Sakura. From somewhere underneath the lowest level of the stadium seating, music issued forth in a cadence of drum rolls and deep sounding flutes. Rina bounced on her seat, weaving her head back and forth trying to see the band and turned to tug on Itachi's sleeve, but her questions were drowned out by the cheers that erupted from the crowd as the smoke dissipated to reveal Konoha's Hokage.

Naruto Uzumaki wore orange, a brilliantly rich shade of orange that covered his arms and legs from ankles to wrists, broken only by the sleeves and collar of a black shirt wore beneath his coat. He carried no visible weapons, and his toes poked out of a pair of sandals with cleat-like soles. However, none of this stood out half so much as a one swollen, puffy cheek and an eye ringed with a black bruise that mangled his face halfway up one side of nose.

"Oooh," she heard Tenten exclaim. "What happened to him?"

Ino burst out laughing. "Sakura!"

The Hokage grinned ear to ear, passing a hand behind his head and turning in a half circle to acknowledge the bellowing crowd.

Sakura gestured for Naruto to stand equidistant from her in correlation to Sasuke. Sasuke waited with his arms crossed. Naruto backed up, waved again to the crowd, and rolled up his sleeves. He

then seemed to tune out the cheers, putting his hands on his knees, glaring insidiously at Sasuke from his side of the arena.

"Okay!" Sakura shouted, and by secret jutsu or a powerful set of lungs, her voice carried clearly throughout the stadium. "Our contenders have finally arrived! The Hokage wishes to remind you that this is a friendly match between old time rivals. Handicaps are as follows: At no time will any jutsu be allowed that endangers the onlookers in any way, so no erratic lightning from Sasuke or maelstroms from Naruto. Summons are restricted to a size befitting our arena. Each competitor will rely on his own chakra stores, so no Senjutsu for Naruto. To complicate matters, our contenders have agreed to demonstrate handling all three major ninja abilities—in either attack or defense—before a win can be called in their favor. That means at least one occurrence of Taijutsu, Genjutsu, and Ninjutsu, folks!"

"See, that's why Sasuke has the advantage," Ino muttered, rocking the bassinet where her baby slept obliviously through the din. "Naruto can't even *use* Genjutsu. If Sasuke never uses it, Naruto can't technically win."

"Sasuke will use it, though," Chouji said. "It's too much in his favor not to try and overpower Naruto with Genjusu. Besides, he doesn't have the stamina to drag the battle out forever. He has to try and win before he runs out of chakra or Naruto will win by default."

"Or they'll both tie," Ino muttered.

"They're too competitive to tie. Sasuke will use it as soon as he thinks he's got Naruto cornered. Just watch."

Genjutsu. That was another similarity between the Uchiha brothers then. Lucia had experienced the effects of Genjutsu, though even her memory of it was like a dream. A dream of a dream.

Lucia held her breath as Sakura spoke quietly to both contenders. As she talked, Sasuke and Naruto looked each other in the eye. Their

expressions were identical: excitement simmering beneath a veneer of calculated calm broken only by a small smile and shining eyes. She could almost feel them adjusting strategies as they sized each other up. Saskue smiled, and his eyes changed, the Sharingan altering the shape and color of his eye. Across from him, Naruto grinned at that blood red stare.

Sakura raised an arm. She gave the crowd a moment to notice. "Ready?"

The stadium became immediately silent. Lucia felt her own breath hitch in her throat. Beside her, Rina jumped to her feet and joined Itachi at the rail, both of them on their toes.

"Begin!" Sakura shouted, and lowered her arm in a line to slice the air between the two opposing ninja. She jumped back immediately and raced up the back wall of the arena, her booted foot propelling her up the sheer face and onto a small platform that jutted out of the wall for her use.

In that blurred second, she missed first contact.

With a face-splitting grin, Naruto charged, a kunai knife rotating up into his hand from somewhere on his person. The crowd roared in response, some incredulously, some in dismay, others in excitement. Sasuke crouched, a knife of his own coming to his grip as Naruto's kunai spun once on his index finger and flew smoothly through the air. Almost simultaneously, Sasuke's kunai rippled off his knuckles. It collided with Naruto's in midair. By the time both knives crashed into the dirt, Sasuke had met Naruto hand to fist several paces away.

Naruto punched with force powerful enough to break bone, but Sasuke caught Naruto's fist and threw his whole body into a forward lunge, flinging Naruto up over his shoulder and through the air. Naruto twisted, his feet kicking for purchase, and landed in a crouch several meters behind Sasuke, still grinning.

Sasuke turned to face him, showing the crowd a piece of paper stuck to Sasuke's back.

"Exploding paper," Tenten said. "Does he know?"

"Probably," Neji said.

Lucia's fingers twisted in her lap. Exploding…?

Before she had time to think, a hollow boom resounded through the arena, the echo ricocheting from wall to wall. In front of her, a flash of yellow and white light consumed the place where Sasuke had been standing.

At the same moment, Naruto brought his thumb to his mouth and seemed—incredibly—to bite it hard enough to puncture the skin. Lucia thought she saw the blood drip into the dirt just seconds before Naruto slammed his hand to the ground.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Spidery black lines ran in patterns in the dirt, visible only for a moment, before a second hollow boom rattled the arena. By the time the flash of light from the exploding paper faded, smoke consumed everything.

It had taken only an instant.

"I can't see!" Itachi said. "What happened?"

"Naruto used the exploding paper to distract Sasuke while he did a summons," Tenten told him. "And something else maybe. Can you see what he did, Neji? Where did Sasuke go?"

Neji didn't answer.

"We'll see what Naruto summoned in just a …." Chouji trailed off.

"There he is!" Ino pointed, but not at Naruto.

Sasuke seemed to materialize out of nowhere, halfway up the wall of the arena, well away from where the flash bomb had had left an ugly scorch mark on the ground. Lucia could not explain how he evaded the blast, nor how he managed to hang onto the wall with his feet, or the quick succession of hand seals that blurred before her eyes, but she recognized the hand gesture Saskue used next. He brought his hand to his mouth, fingers curled into the palm and the thumb crooked to create a kind of funnel.

"Fire," she whispered.

"Katon. Ryuuka no Jutsu!"

Flame erupted from the air blown from Sasuke's lips. It funneled narrowly between his fingers, eating the air for several yards in a controlled streamline until it was well away from face of the ninja who created it. Then it exploded in a swirling billow of flame that burned an eight-foot wide swath across the floor of the arena heading straight for the smoke hiding Naruto and his summons. Tongues of fire licked outward, extending the reach of the fire almost wall to wall. Everything green and growing on the ground withered and turned to ash.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Itachi's mouth dropped open.

Sasuke's eight foot funnel of flame punched through the Naruto's shroud of smoke and seemed to hit a block. Fire climbed straight up a wall of air, fanning in all directions from the impact until Sasuke ran out of breath and tongues of fire died, leaving wisps of smoke hanging in the sky to drift away like tiny clouds. The Uchiha slid deftly down the wall.

The smoke cleared.

"Frogs?" Itachi said in disbelief.

"Big frogs!" Rina chirped.

They were toads actually, as evidenced by their thick, warty skins and shorter legs. They were big toads, each the size of a man. They formed a cluster around Naruto in numbers as great as eight or nine; it was hard to count the pairs of yellow eyes because of the way they squirmed in a succession of tiny hops and croaks. All the toads were red with black spots. They had meaty legs, enormous bulging throats, and rather than smoking from a roast in the fire, they glowed a merry red like hot coals. They wiggled their webbed toes in rosy contentment. Naruto's orange sleeve was barely distinguishable among them.

"Fire toads," Lee said. "They live in the mountains, near the volcanoes. They're immune to heat."

As soon as the smoke from Sasuke's flame jutsu dissipated, Naruto scrambled out of the pile. Toads tumbled over each other and broke apart, croaking plaintively as they were pushed around, their large, glossy black and yellow eyes following Naruto as he leapt into the air over their heads, landed solidly on the ground, and dashed up the side of the arena wall. He raced along the wall, impossibly and completely sideways, parallel to the ground, as if the wall were a track. He ran away from Sasuke.

Sasuke's feet hit the ground. He was fast. Too fast. He left the wall and cut across the center of the arena in a straight line, moving like a blur. He blazed passed the cluster of confused toads and headed for the far wall, seemingly intent on intercepting Naruto before he curved halfway around the stadium.

When Sasuke hit the center of the arena, Naruto seemed to catch on and staggered down from the wall. He landed on the ground behind a bush.

"Tajū Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

Replicas of the Hokage burst from the bushes. There were seven, plus the original.

"How can you beat that?" Itachi exclaimed. Rina squealed in terror, presumably for Sasuke.

Saskue stopped, grinned, and pulled his sword from its sheath. The steel blade was long, elegant, and slightly curved. It glinted in the glow of encroaching twilight.

The eight Narutos ran forward. They spoke as one. "Come on, guys! We talked about this!"

It wasn't clear whether they were speaking to each other or to someone else. They leapt over bushes and darted around trees. They stopped at a generous number of paces from Sasuke and formed a line shoulder to orange shoulder.

"Is this how it's going to be?" Saskue taunted, and brandished his sword. "Come on then!"

The clones grinned. As one, they raised their arms, one elbow straight down and the other out, the fingers of both hands intertwining to form some kind of a hand seal. Lucia had no idea which it was or what it would do.

"He's not going for Taijutsu! He's going to do a ninjutsu!" Ino gasped.

"Maybe he thinks Sasuke can't counter because he's holding the sword?" Lee suggested.

"Too fast," Neji said.

It was clear he meant Sasuke. Naruto formed more hand seals, his fingers flashing, but in the time it took all eight clones to complete the seals, Sasuke had driven his blade into the ground and formed hand seals of his own. His hands blurred so fast, Lucia could barely make out the movement of his fingers. They finished almost simultaneously.

"Hitofuki no jutsu!" the Narutos cried.

And right on top of them: "Katon: Housenka no Jutsu!"

In front of the line of Narutos, the air swirled in on itself, churning in place until it formed a gust of wind that swelled like a great wave. It could be seen like the shimmer of desert heat, colorless and translucent, but moving so fast that the dirt from the earth just beneath it was sucked into the swell, turning it an ugly gray color as it surged toward Sasuke. Meanwhile, flame erupted from Sasuke's mouth, this time in quick successive bursts like bullets of fire that grew wings of flame like birds as they hurtled at each of the Naruto clones.

"Fire beats wind," Tenten groaned.

"Maybe not," Neji said. "This chakra shape isn't designed to cut. He's trying to blow the fire back."

Eight bursts of flame the size of eagles collided with the wave of wind. The flame absorbed the wind and grew stronger, flaring into a great fiery orb that burst like an exploding star between both ninja. Both Sasuke and Naruto's clones ducked, shielding their faces with their eyes. The flame was so hot, Lucia could feel a tinge of the heat on her face as she stared into the blinding yellow light.

And then, through the roar and heat and dust, Naruto's voice was screeching. "Now! Now! Now!"

"Oh!" Tenten exclaimed. "This is bad for Sasuke!"

Naruto spoke to the toads. Only five of the eight responded (the other three seemed to have decided to take naps in the shade of a tree). The five participants had formed a line behind Sasuke, and from that line they belched on Naruto's command. Gaseous fumes reeking of oil and sulfur spewed from their throats, not at Sasuke's back, but into the fire.

The tongues of fire blazing from the central heat caught the whiff of gasses, licked the oil, swallowed, flared, and surged toward Sasuke

like a thing alive.

"He's going to be eaten by his own jutsu!" Ino said.

Lucia stared. Sasuke had no chance to escape. He crouched instead, his body stretched out parallel to the ground on splayed fingers and toes. The flame roared over his head, but no matter how low, any man would be roasted by that heat. In a moment, it didn't matter.

"Hitofuki no jutsu!" TheNarutos mercilessly repeated the wind jutsu.

Lucia felt faint as the flame roared even larger, swallowing Sasuke completely and crawling halfway across the arena floor. The toads stayed put, smiling into the light as they were swept into the fire.

"I missed it," Chouji said, eating potato chips two and time very fast now. "Was Sasuke roasted? Or did he use a substitution?"

"If he did, it was burned to a crisp," Lee answered. When the flames finally vanished, Lucia could see only a pile of ashes on the ground where Sasuke had been. Around it, the toads croaked happily, glowing red like embers.

Some of the Narutos congratulated each other with wide grins and slaps on the back while others wandered around the arena, checking —Lucia presumed—for some hidden space a miraculously un-scorched Sasuke might leap out from.

The laughing ones, three of them conveniently clustered together, vanished suddenly in a puff of smoke. At first, Lucia didn't see what happened. The attack—whatever it was—came from the shadows. A line of blue, as thin as wire, jutted out from a fold in the ground near the northern arena wall, directly across from the onlookers. It was silent and deadly, a sniper shot of lightning shaped like a spear with no end. Naruto's remaining clones whirled, facing Sasuke as he rose —completely unharmed—from the shadows. Sasuke's hand blazed with blue lightning that crackled like the twittering of birds. From that

fist, a second jolt of lighting pierced through the center of the arena. The lightning was like a stretched blade elongated from the energy in his hand, never leaving his control as it reached across the entire arena floor.

"He'll just throw wind back at him," Neji guessed.

The five remaining Narutos formed handseals, perhaps to do just that, but Sasuke didn't aim the lightning at them. Instead this shot consumed the sword he had driven into the earth, and from that, lighting burst erratically through the ground. The two clones closest to it shuddered and vanished, electrocuted from underneath by the swift current.

Three clones remained, all three startled by what had happened to the other two. Sasuke charged them, swinging through the center of the arena, his face holding back a smile, as he pulled the sword from the ground and attacked the first with a sweep.

"Is that the real Naruto?" Itachi asked, his eyes wide as he watched the Naruto under attack avoid the swipe of the blade, but just barely. "Can Sasuke tell which is the real one?"

"Nope," Chouji answered. "Naruto's too good with shadow clones. Gotta go through them one by one."

"Shouldn't the real one hang back?"

"Naruto *never* hangs back," Ino said with a shake of her head.

True to her word, the other two clones charged, their hands flying through the formation of seals as they ran.

"Kage Buushin no Jutsu!"

Two Narutos doubled to four, making a total of five. They rushed Sasuke all at once, forming a circle of fists and kicks. Sasuke met them hand to fist, blocking, ducking and twisting nimbly out of their

reach, the sword flashing through the air, cutting nothing but air, but making the Narutos scramble and trip over each other to avoid a lethal blow. One Naruto narrowly missed decapitation, but his neighbor wasn't so lucky, and then the barrage was four to one. The upswing took out another clone. Three to one.

"Sasuke's going to win this," Tenten said with disbelief. "He's going to get down to the last Naruto and then…"

"Genjutsu," Neji finished.

The last two clones died with a punch to the face and a sword swipe through the middle. Sasuke stood heaving, sword arm out in front of him like a shield, holding the sword handle at a back swing, his feet spread so wide apart he half crouched. His eyes were hard as agate stones, staring at the fifth and last remaining Naruto with that calculating, red-eyed gaze.

Lucia swallowed. Her heart beat strangely in her chest. In combat, Sasuke looked so much like Itachi Uchiha. He had the same stare.

"Gotcha," Sasuke said coolly. "No more clones? Low on chakra, Naruto? That wind technique must have taken something out of you!"

The tomoe in the Sharingan turned. Naruto didn't move. He seemed to be freeze to the spot, arms still at his sides, his mouth half parted.

"Genjutsu," Ino muttered.

"Sasuke needs to be careful," Neji said in a low voice. " He's almost out of chakra."

"But that's a win, isn't it?" Tenten said. "I mean, Naruto's incapacitated."

"It's not over till it's over," Chouji countered.

"That's right!" Lee shouted. "He could release it!"

But whatever it was, Naruto didn't release it. He Naruto didn't seem to know where he was. He stared straight ahead with wide blue eyes. He was so taken in by whatever he saw that he slumped forward, his bones seeming to turn to jelly as his muscles went limp. His body landed heavily on the ground.

As soon as it hit the earth, the body vanished in a puff.

Sasuke's eyes widened. The stadium roared.

"They were *all* clones?" Ino shrieked, her hands flying to her hair. "How is that even possible? Where is the real Naruto?"

Sasuke turned in a circle, sword dangling from his hand, but it was clear he hadn't missed a single one. Silence ticked by. The roar of the crowd muted to a buzz. Everyone was talking at once. Except for Sasuke, the arena was empty.

"If he's not *in* the arena, he can't win, right?" Ino said. "I mean, that should be an automatic disqualification really."

"He's there," Neji answered.

"Where?" Tenten whispered.

"Just wait. Saskue will find him in a minute."

Sasuke turned on his heel, Sharingan eyes darting around the arena, taking in the trees, the bushes, staring into the shadows, and combing over every rise and dip in the ground. That bright orange jacket was nowhere to be seen. It was just shade and earth and a number of bored, yawning toads.

Lucia started in her seat. Eight toads, but only five of which had taken the brunt of the flame or spat fumes.

Everyone seemed to realize it at once.

"Double jutsu!" Chouji exclaimed. "When he first did the summoning! Under the smoke, when Sasuke was avoiding that tag, he must have done a clone transformation! That's a Genin-level trick!"

Lucia recalled the exploding tag stuck to the back of Sasuke's shirt, the resulting scramble, the bursts of smoke and flame obscuring everyone's vision. After that, everything had progressed so fast.

"Sasuke didn't even look at the toads!" Tenten exclaimed.

"That means I was wrong," Ino said. "He actually hung back."

"First time ever," Chouji said with a nod.

"Which toad is the real Naruto?"

Sasuke seemed to have the same thought. He withdrew three kunai knives from a pouch attached to his belt. His eyes narrowed. The toads that had been napping in the shade lifted their heads and croaked with alarm as Sasuke's arm swung back. Kunai knives flew through the air. Two of the toads vanished, the knives sinking into the earth where they had been squatting. The other five toads Sasuke vanished at the same time. The last toad, lounging in the shade of a tree far away where it was comfortably hidden by a pile of leaves, turned into Naruto.

The Hokage grinned.

"He's not even close to out of chakra," Neji muttered. "He must have distributed just what he thought the clones would need and hoarded the rest. Sasuke was wrong. That wind jutsu was very efficient. The amount of practice that must have gone into…!"

"Tajū Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

Lucia's mouth dropped open. With a sound like thunder, everyone in the stands jumped to their feet. Absolutely everyone. Lucia stood

too, as if pulled by a marionette string. Shouts reverberated off the walls.

Hundreds of Narutos filled the arena. There must have been at least three hundred, crowding every spot of ground in a sea of black and orange that swallowed half of the arena floor.

Sasuke swung his sword in an arc, but it was plain by his face that he had nothing left to combat that.

"Give up, Sasuke!" Naruto cried—hundred of Narutos. The shout was deafening.

Sasuke grimaced, but his hand only tightened on the hilt of his sword.

"He's not going to give up, is he?" Ino said with a resigned sigh.

"Nope," Chouji answered. "He'd rather take a beating."

"Naruto's not going to go easy on him either, is he?"

"Nope."

The clones charged.

Lucia had to admit. Sasuke was beautiful with a sword. He cut through the first wave of clones as they came at him, his reflexes slicing through arms, legs, necks, and skewering clones through the middle. There was no gore. The shadow clones vanished as soon as they were wounded, and the sword never stopped moving. Neither did Sasuke. He rotated, caught his opponents high and low, twisted out of their clasping grasps, leaving them holding air, and smoothly avoided punches and kicks.

"If he has that much chakra, Naruto *could* just take him out with a ninjutsu," Ino said.

"Nah. That's not as satisfying," Chouji answered. "I'll bet sitting out most the fight was pretty hard for Naruto. He'd need more training for that than anything else. He'll try to kick him down."

"You think he trained by transforming one of his clones into Sasuke and watching the others beat it up while he tried to hold it in?" Tenten suggested. There was a faint twitch in her voice like a snicker.

Neji laughed. The laughter was unrestrained. It was a startling sound from someone who had watched the entire fight with such stoicism, saying little and giving away nothing. Lucia could not feel the humor.

Sasuke's sword writhed like a moving shadow in the gathering darkness. Dusk had descended into the deep, brilliant blue of twilight. Only the brightest stars glimmered overhead, the rest of the sky bruised royal blue as the last light of sunset faded behind the mountains. Sasuke's Sharingan eyes gleamed crimson, catching what remained of the light as he twisted serpent-like, his sword dispatching clones in clusters of two and three now. But more swarmed in, and more waited behind those for their turn. Sasuke's half of the stadium, the same half he had started with, shrank to a quarter, and then to an eighth, and then to a sixteenth, as he was pushed further and further back toward the wall.

"Sasuke's Lightning Wall could protect him from those clones," Tenten suggested.

"Not enough chakra to maintain it," Neji said with a shake of his head.

Beside Lucia, Itachi's eyes were wide as saucers, watching without hardly breathing as Sasuke fell back further and further. Sweat dripped from Sasuke's face, and still the clones came on, but his muscles didn't relax or weaken by a hair. The sword kept moving.

"He really must not have *any* charka left!" Ino said, sitting very straight on her seat. "But," she added with awe, "it looks like he just might be able take out all of those clones anyway!"

The longer it continued, the more this thought seemed to dawn on the rest of the crowd. Chouji stopped eating potato chips. Itachi began hammering on the rail, whispering "come on" under his breath. Rina stood beside him, clutching her book with knuckles that whitened from the strength of her grip.

Lucia swallowed, suddenly overcome by a wave of dizziness she couldn't explain. She could only watch, gripped by horror she didn't understand, as Sasuke fell back to the wall, desperate now, persevering doggedly, but without foreseeable hope. There was no emotion on his face—just intensity of concentration. Speculation crouched in Lucia's mind like vultures. Was this how it had been? She waved the thought aside, suppressed it, even as it threatened to bubble over. She had always avoided thinking about it. But she still felt hot, suffocated.

"He just might-!" Ino began, elation on her face.

"Did you bet on Sasuke or something?" Chouji demanded. "Without telling me?"

Ino didn't answer.

Sasuke's fist crackled with lightning.

Heaving for breath, Sasuke's crimson eyes stared balefully at his opponents—dozens of them—memorizing the pattern of their moments, staring at how each moved in conjunction with the next. Then he gripped this sword by the hilt with both hands and slammed the blade deep into the ground.

Lighting exploded from the rock. Dirt and debris flew outward, crashing into the front line of attacking clones. Behind it, emanating from Sasuke's sword, came jagged, crackling shapes like angry blue dragons shooting through the air, eating through clones by the handfuls as they spun out in a half circle around Sasuke. Shock registered on the faces of the clones as they exploded into smoke one by one, but the lightning didn't stop there. It radiated from one

clone to the next, feeding on the current generated by tightly packed bodies, webbing its way through all the clones until the entire arena looked like a net of lightning. Not a single Naruto escaped.

Every remaining clone vanished. Sasuke, shoulders slumped forward, stayed on his feet as the last Naruto—his clothes scorched and his hair standing on end—dropped to the ground. Across the arena, Sasuke trembled. The insides of his hands seemed scorched from the handle of his sword. The fingers curled, but did not close. Pain was visible on his face. That jutsu had hurt him too.

"Is that all you got?" Naruto demanded. He rose, coming to his feet slowly but deliberately with a barely perceptible wobble.

Sasuke didn't answer. Pushed back to the very edge of the wall, he only panted, his clothes hanging off his body in disarray.

Naruto's hands formed seals.

The final attack was a wind attack. A long-distance wind attack. Crouching in place, he repeatedly swatted the air in front of him as if chopping at the trunk of an invisible tree. Gusts of wind whipped from his hands, visible only as shimmers in the air like flying scythes. They careened wildly, seemingly difficult to aim. If Sasuke could still move, he might have been able out-maneuvered them, but he was frazzled from the lightning, and out of chakra. The first erratic blasts crashed into the wall behind Sasuke's head and bit into the stone, leaving gashes a foot long. Sasuke blocked the assault from hitting his head with the steel guards on his arms. The wind cut into the rest of him, leaving trails of blood to soak into tattered clothes, but he stayed on his feet. Lucia felt her throat constrict.

Grimacing, Naruto changed tactics, and the jutsu shifted slightly. The next volley seemed heavy rather than sharp, and even more erratic. When these slammed into Sasuke, Lucia heard the sickening crunch of bones breaking. The wall behind Sasuke took the hits like they were sledge hammers. Sasuke went down after that round, falling to

his knees, his arms trembling from fractures. On the third volley, he coughed up blood. Naruto lunged forward.

Panic overcame her. Lucia didn't understand it and didn't try. All she knew was she felt trapped, as if she were drowning. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. The rapid pounding of her heart frightened her, as if the fragile organ was trying to beat its way out of her chest.

"I need to get out!" she gasped. Heat came next. Sweat poured off her face and dampened her dress and hair. Ino and Chouji turned to her in amazement. Rising swiftly, they pressed back against the bench to let her through.

"Are you okay?"

She didn't answer. Lucia stumbled out of the row, ignoring the bewildered looks of her children, and raced up the aisle stairs. All around her, the crowd was a surging, screaming, undulating sea of humanity.

She ran until she reached the very top of the stadium and was able to slip behind the last row of seats and out of eyesight. She spotted a shadowed corner and sank gratefully into the darkness, closing her eyes and clutching her chest as she lowered her body to the ground. Breathing deeply, she counted. She didn't stop counting until her heart beat slowed, the sweat dried on her forehead and the world stopped spinning around her. Nausea slowly receded. One hundred and twenty seven counts.

She hadn't had an anxiety attack since she was a girl, but she recognized it. As it dissipated she was left with the shakes. She leaned her head against cold stone, holding herself still, eyes closed, as the crowd below erupted in a roar that seemed to go on for hours.

The chant of "NA-RU-TO" and "HO-KA-GE" filled the stadium.

Lucia tried not to think. Images filled her mind, memories really, but she let them drift by without interpreting them, without suppressing

them, without engaging at all. She didn't want to remember, but the images kept coming.

She opened her eyes.

Up the stairs she saw her son running toward her, care jumbling his face into worry, Rina close behind. Such a familiar face. Expressions she had seen on a face just like that long ago surfaced from among the images, expressions she had forgotten, or pushed aside as unimportant next to what she had to do.

"Are you okay?" Itachi asked her.

He grabbed her hand, knelt beside her, and covered her fingers with his other hand. She stared up at him in surprise. He was growing so big. It wouldn't be long before he looked just like him.

"Mama?" Rina whispered. She fell onto her knees beside her brother, looking into Lucia's face.

She was scaring them.

"I'm fine," she said, and repeated it to persuade herself. "I'm perfectly fine."

They didn't look convinced.

"The Hokage won?" she asked, a little unsteadily.

"Yeah," Itachi said. "They carried Sasuke off the field. I guess they have special healers, though. Ino said we shouldn't worry. Are you sure you'reall right?"

"Just anxiety," she said. "It was the excitement, I think, after such a long trip…" She trailed off. That wasn't it at all. She suspected her son knew she lied, but he didn't say anything. "I just needed to sit down away from the crowd."

She knew what had happened, and it was not the violence that upset her. Violence never upset her. She didn't want to think what had. It was stupid. Ridiculous. Meaningless. She told herself it was just nerves. Doubt was to be expected, and duly ignored.

Only one question mattered now. What had the Hokage wanted her to see tonight? Was it his strength? His skills? His victory? She suspected that was partly it, but it had to be more than that. Was it specifically what he had done to Sasuke? If so, was it as a competitor? As a rival? As a threat? As an Uchiha? She didn't think so. By all accounts, Sasuke and Naruto were friends.

Friends.

One possible message came to mind.

This is what I can do, even to my friends.

What about his enemies?

She didn't know if that was it, but she shivered at the thought. She looked again at her son. His dark eyes were bright and clear, intelligent and generous, innocent of sacrifice, of compromise, of suffering. He had become a part of Konoha. Would those eyes be crimson eyes some day? Would they be hard eyes, aloof and desolate, full of tightly guarded emotion?—Uchiha eyes. Shinobi eyes.

She took a deep breath, and smiled.

"We should go," she said firmly. "You have school tomorrow."

TBC

Congratulations! You made it to the end! Are you ready to review? You wouldn't read all of that and just walk away, would you? …you would?

For those who struggle with "what to say," here's a helpful tip.

I really just want to know what I'm doing right. Please tell me anything you found genuinely interesting—even if it's just a sentence. If there's something you don't like, you can let me know that too, but please distinguish between mistakes on my part versus mistakes characters make as part of the story. This story has themes. They probably aren't obvious yet, but if anything makes you think, please share what. Finally, tell me if you like reading the story! Let me know what you are hoping or dreading will happen. Also, action scenes, and particularly ninja battles, are REALLY hard to write (I tried), so let me know what you thought.

What you say inspires the writing—or procrastination of—the next chapter. Thanks so much!

Chapter 6

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays! This chapter is risqué and full of angst, which isn't very festive, but I hope you enjoy it! The plot thickens. So does the character development, but I'm not sure how it will be received—so please don't forget to comment!

For those who commented last chapter (or every chapter—I love you best), THANK YOU VERY MUCH! For those who have never commented, what do you think?

Warnings : This fanfic is for 16+ readers (rated M). It contains sexual references , mature themes (including sado-masochism...described vaguely but not "shown"), some violence, a very little bit of swearing, and other material. , This fic FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES for this site so please do not report it as MA. There are no explicit sex scenes. All such scenes "cut off" before anything happens. Violence is typical for a story about ninjas. There isn't anything extremely disturbing described in any detail.

White Rain

Chapter 6

By Zapenstap

Itachi awoke the next morning still dazzled from the day before.

He had dreamed crazy dreams. He dreamed about flame and lightning and windstorms. Then he dreamed about the Hokage riding on the backs of toads. That dream had turned into an unlikely situation where the Hokage traveled a long way by frog-back just to teach Itachi his first jutsu. It had been exciting at first, but Itachi didn't understand Naruto's instructions and couldn't quite get the jutsu to work. No matter how many questions he asked or how many times

Naruto repeated the answers, he just didn't understand. He became panicked. Off to the side, his mother frowned over his lack of progress and kept telling him that there wasn't enough money. When he failed for the third time, his uncle Sasuke leapt out of the shadows and drove him through with a sword.

He awoke with a start. The nightmare was disconnected and nonsensical, but in an exaggerated way, it summed up his nervous feelings. It gave him the shakes for a few minutes. He buried his head in his pillow and breathed normally, thinking about the dream until it no longer seemed real and the shaking stopped.

Once he was up, the morning crawled by. He got ready quickly, making himself as presentable as possible in the clothes he had left home wearing, which was nothing like what the kids here wore but would have to do until he had something better. Then he shuffled downstairs to sit at the table. His mother woke up Rina and prepared both of them breakfast, which he ate haltingly while trying to quell the butterflies in his stomach. He and Rina stuffed the books Mr. Umino had given them in the bags they had traveled with and left for school together.

The first day of school was just like it had always been, except that Itachi had never felt nervous about school in his life. He had always been good at academics, the top of his class, but this would be so different. He had read for hours yesterday, but he didn't feel any more prepared. He got through a lot of the textbook, but it was a lot of information and hard to understand even with diagrams and descriptions. He thought he had a grasp of basic terminology, but hand signs baffled him. They were supposed to be based on animals, but the diagrams didn't look like the animals they were supposed to represent, and he kept getting them mixed up. Besides which, there seemed to be so many different kinds of things that could be done with chakra that went way beyond jutsu. A lot of it was explained using examples of famous ninja living or dead, but that wasn't helpful for someone not born in Konoha.

Rina practiced hand signs as they walked through the village to the Academy building. He watched her out of the corner of his eye. Her formations were slow and clumsy, but he was a little envious that she seemed to have picked up the order more quickly than he had. She went through all twelve slowly and deliberately, over and over, forming each sign carefully and muttering under her breath with each completion. It helped him to watch.

They arrived at the Academy grounds as stragglers. Other students could be seen drifting into the building in groups from a variety of entrances, most of them around Rina's age. Those Itachi's age clearly saw themselves as kings of the school yard—the oldest and closest to graduation, almost Genin—and could be seen lounging around outside with expressions arranged carefully to look slightly bored.

Itachi led Rina under the green leaf boughs of the trees they had walked under just yesterday. The glen was just as beautiful as before, the dew on the grass sparkling deep green and getting stuck to their shoes as they cut across it and made their way to the main doors. No one intercepted them this time. No one said a word to them, though Itachi caught a few curious looks directed their way.

He walked Rina to class and stood with her for a minute by the door. At their old school, it was a bit of a relief to get rid of her, but that was when he had his own friends and having her tag along all the time was a bit of a nuisance. Today, he had rather mixed feelings about separating.

He peeked inside her classroom. It looked pleasant. Broad wooden desks wrapped halfway around the room on rises. Students Rina's age or maybe a year younger swung their feet on little chairs with notebooks and pencils on the desk in front of them. Except for their clothes—Rina was the only girl in eyesight wearing a blouse and skirt—they didn't look anything like ninjas yet. They just looked like kids.

In front of the room, Tenten was writing a schedule on the board. She turned her head when Itachi peeked in and smiled at them.

"You got everything?" Itachi asked his sister.

Rina nodded at him and smiled back at Tenten, waving one hand.

"You like her, right?" Itachi guessed. Rina nodded again. No surprise there. Rina usually liked her teachers, and took a particular liking to women that were young and pretty and cheerful. He took a deep breath. "Okay. Good luck."

He watched her shuffle in, book bag in hand, just like the first day of school anywhere. Tenten directed her to an empty seat between two other students, one a boy and the other a girl. Rina could be reserved with strangers, not out of shyness, but because she was just like that. But in this case they said hello first and she greeted them back as she settled in. The girl seemed to like Rina's skirt. Rina beamed and just like that, they were friends. Itachi waited another few seconds, watching as the girl lent Rina a colored pencil, and took a deep breath. He suspected his own acclimation would be a bit tougher.

Itachi left the doorway and made his way through the halls to the classroom for the oldest students in the Academy. According to his textbook, most students would graduate the Academy by their eleventh or twelfth year. His twelfth birthday was coming up, but as far as ninja training was concerned, he was at the level of the kids in Rina's class. He would have to catch up—fast—or they would hold him back a year, or drop him from the program entirely.

When he arrived, it was immediately obvious that the other students already knew who he was. Conversation halted when he passed through the door, and all eyes swung to him. No teacher was in the room yet, but students huddled around the desks in small groups. They wore mesh shirts, loose-fitting pants, and either boots or shoes with cleat-like soles. They also wore pouches and sashes and bandages. Some had wrapped their heads and faces in high collars,

hoods, and masks. They carried *weapons* into the classroom. That startled him, but only momentarily. He could see a pair of knives peeking out of the boot tops of a girl with bright blue eyes and flaming red hair.

They looked at him and he looked back. Conversation resumed after several heartbeats. The ninja students seemed to have been discussing the match between Naruto and Sasuke before he arrived, and they went right back to it as soon as they chose to ignore him. The largest group clustered around a boy seated on top of one of the desks who whipped his arms through the air in imitation of Naruto's final wind jutsu. Nearly everyone seemed to be talking about it. Some were acting out scenes from the fight, arguing over the details, hypothesizing different outcomes, and proclaiming loyalty to their favorite fighters. Awe was the universal sentiment. He heard a lot of "when I'm a Genin I will…"

Itachi walked slowly across the threshold, sweeping the area for a place to go—an empty seat, preferably in the back of the room, would be ideal. Unfortunately, from the way students hung around on top of the tables and in the aisles, he couldn't tell for sure which chairs were really open. He hesitated until he caught a smile directed at him from a friendly face.

It was the girl he had met yesterday. She was seated by the far window, on the middle rise, just below the larger group of kids without being part of their cluster. Her short brown hair was fastened away from her face with a hairclip and her eyes were the same sweet, golden color he remembered. She smiled at him and gestured to the seat next to her. Saved. Better than saved.

Itachi crossed the room with as much confidence as he could muster, ignoring the weighing looks of the others that flickered to him as he passed. He tried to appear as if their stares didn't bother him. Most looked away as soon as it became apparent that he wasn't going to react, but a few continued to watch him. Their gazes weren't hostile or anything, but their curiosity made him uncomfortable. A few

noted where he was headed and glanced the girl's way, but she returned their looks pointedly, and they shrugged.

"Hey," she said, and she smiled when he made his way up the aisle and slid into the seat beside her. "I'm Amaya. I don't think I told you yesterday."

"Amaya," he repeated, trying out the sound of it. "I'm Itachi."

"Really," she said quietly, not as if she didn't believe it, but rather as though confirming a rumor. He was sure she must have heard him declare his name yesterday, but maybe she really hadn't believed him then. Her lashes lifted as she looked at him. All of a sudden he felt warm.

"Really," he replied, and he smiled to show he wasn't offended. Even if she had meant to offend him, he didn't think he could have stopped himself from smiling at her. Amaya. He felt a little giddy. "Is your friend here?" he asked, suddenly remembering where smiling at this girl had gotten him the day before.

"Haro? Not yet," she replied, and leaned her cheek on her hand, apparently unconcerned. "He always gets here at the last minute. Do you-?" she began, but was cut off.

"Hey. Uchiha."

It took Itachi a second to realize he was being addressed. The back of his neck prickled. This time he felt hostility. It was a boy's voice that spoke, but not the angry one—Haro—that had glared at him yesterday. When he turned in his chair, a murmur of "ooh!" rippled through the room. Itachi focused on the one who had spoken.

It was the boy who had been imitating Naruto's wind jutsu. He sat on the desk on the rise above him, feet planted firmly on the surface of the table, his arms looped casually around his knees. He had short, jet black hair that hung around his face in wild strands that partially obscured a pair of piercing blue eyes. He was possibly a year older

than Itachi, and developed for his age, even more so than the rest of the kids, with muscles toned like an athlete, but it was his smile that seemed to draw the attention of everyone in the room. A group of boys and girls had gathered in a circle around him. He had a flashing, white toothed smile and held himself in a way that radiated self-assurance. His smile had the appearance of friendliness, and if Itachi hadn't seen smiles like that before, he might have found the kid likable. As it was, Itachi didn't feel friendly. That smile reminded him of Gehard.

He tried not to overreact. "My name is Itachi," he said, loud enough to be heard throughout a room that had suddenly become silent. "Van Alstyne."

He had everyone's attention now.

"Do you have a Sharingan, *Van Alstyne* ?" the boy asked.

The emphasis added to the surname was slightly mocking. Some of the watching kids giggled. It was funny to Itachi too, but not in same way. His mother's maiden name had always sounded somewhat pretentious to Itachi, but this boy seemed to be deriding it because, to him, it must sound a great deal less grand than Uchiha. Maybe the kid thought he was trying to escape their attention by dumbing himself down.

"I don't know," Itachi answered truthfully.

The kid followed up without missing a beat. "Are you really Itachi Uchiha's son?" he asked.

"I guess so," he said.

"So that makes you Sasuke Uchiha's nephew."

"Yes."

"That's kind of impressive," the kid said. "I'll be interested to see what you can do."

"I really can't do anything yet," he said hastily. "I just got here."

The boy grinned, but the effect wasn't pleasant. "You really shouldn't have revealed that," the kid said. "This is a ninja class. Didn't you know? Secrecy is everything. Now everyone knows you're weak."

There was a murmur among his classmates. Some of them eyed the boy with distaste. Others seemed to be weighing Itachi. A few were carefully expressionless. Itachi flushed and swallowed, breathing deeply.

"Leave him alone, Yukio," Amaya said, very coolly. "He's new."

"Hey, I'm just trying to give the kid some advice," Yukio answered her. "Don't act so superior, Amaya. Just because your dad is a Jounin captain doesn't make you smart. Besides, everyone knows that you…"

The door banged open. It was Haro, heaving for breath as if he had run a mile, his hair in disarray and the same dark-eyed glower on his face that he had worn yesterday. He charged across the floor like a bull and bounded up the stairs. Without even looking at Itachi, he removed his book bags, tossed them on the desk in front of Itachi—Itachi had to lean back to avoid having his fingers smashed—and rounded on Yukio.

"Shut up, Yukio! You say one more word to her and I'll pound your face in!" Haro's face was red from the top of his forehead all the way down his neck to the collar of his shirt. Itachi leaned away instinctively, even though there wasn't much room to maneuver what with Haro taking up the space behind him and Amaya blocking the aisle.

Yukio raised his eyebrows. "Oh yeah?"

"Haro, *don't* ," Amaya whispered, and reached up to grab her friend's arm. He shrugged her off, even angrier now, his jaw locked and his eyes glaring up at Yukio, who stared down at him mildly with that self-confident smirk. "Calm down," Amaya pleaded. "He's just blustering. It's not worth it."

Haro's head swung to stare at Amaya, fury twisting his features and a look in his eyes that heaped half a helping of betrayal on Amaya's head. Amaya paled and released his arm.

"You should listen to her, Haro," Yukio said. "It's not worth it." The way he said it, with eyes that didn't change, made it sound like Haro just wasn't worth it to him.

It was clearly a goading kind of threat, and Itachi groaned inwardly. He didn't know Haro, but he knew from their previous exchange that it didn't take much to get a rise out of him. He didn't understand Haro's problem, but the kid's temper had just landed him in a face-off with his pride on the line. If he backed down, he would look weak and Yukio would mock him for taking the advice of a girl. If he didn't, Yukio would probably be the one to pound Haro's face in. Watching Haro's face turn an even uglier shade of red, Itachi didn't think he was going to back down. If someone didn't do something, there was sure to be a fight—now or later.

"Well?" Yukio asked, badgering Haro with his tone and seeming to delight in the way Haro's teeth bared. "What's it going to be?"

"Amaya's right," Itachi broke in. Everyone turned to him, some of them clearly startled that he had butted back into the conversation. Itachi had the feeling he was going to regret this, but he didn't see that he had any choice. Amaya had taken heat for him and Haro had done it for Amaya, so it was only right that he repay the favor. He suspected there was something going on between Amaya, Haro and Yukio beneath the surface, something he should probably stay clear of, but he didn't want anyone to come to blows over him. Besides, Amaya was watching, and she clearly didn't want Haro to fight this

kid. He kept his eyes on Yukio. "I'm new. I just found out I could be a ninja yesterday."

Diversion. That was his usual tactic to diffusing conflict. Wave a flag and keep it interesting. Haro and Yukio broke eye contact to look at him. As the seconds ticked by, the red began to recede from Haro's face. Yukio ignored Haro. He stared at Itachi now instead, his eyes narrowed slightly. He didn't like losing everyone's attention, but Itachi didn't care.

"Where are you from?" the redheaded girl with the blue eyes asked him. She was sitting with another group of kids. "One of the towns?"

"No," he told her. "I'm not from anywhere around here. I didn't even know this village existed until a few weeks ago."

"You didn't know it *existed* ?" Yukio scoffed, clearly amazed. "Konoha is the greatest of the ninja villages. How could you not know it exists? Are you stupid?"

"No," he said. "I come from far away," he explained, but he could tell by their faces that how far that must be escaped them. "Where I come from, there aren't any ninja. It took us weeks just to get here. " Some surprised stares.

"Like the Wave Country?" the redhead asked.

"No. Way farther." He looked around the room, not at all the kids staring at him, but at the walls, until he found a map of the continent they had come to. All the five ninja nations were represented, with the fire nation in the center. "Look," he said, gesturing to the wall. "There's the fire country in red, right? And to the west of it the River Country and to the west of that the Wind Country. Most of the Wind Country is desert, and you can't see it all on that map even, but if you keep going, off the map, you come to plains, and more mountains, and a sea, and then my country."

"Wow," someone said.

The redhead looked at him with curiosity. "How was it that you were born?"

Some of the other kids snickered.

She flushed, her face turning bright pink all the way to her hairline, giving her the appearance of a strawberry or tomato. "I mean, I know *how* ," she said, "but if Itachi Uchiha is your father, then…" She trailed off in an embarrassed titter.

"You are *so* rude, Michiko!" one of the other kids laughed at her.

"I don't know," Itachi answered. "My mom traveled here for business, I think, a long time ago." He was certain it was more complicated, but he didn't know the details and didn't want to get into it.

"What kind of business?"

"Banking," he said, and realized how boring that probably sounded to these kids.

"So you really don't know anything about being a ninja?" Yukio interrupted. There was obvious contempt in his voice. The other students looked again at Yukio. This guy was all about attention. "You're only half Uchiha and you don't have a Sharingan. How do you expect to keep up with the rest of us? Did they tell you when you joined that the graduation exam is only a few weeks away?"

No, they didn't tell him that. A few weeks? He took a deep breath. "What is on the exam?"

"Oh, just basic Academy stuff," Yukio said off-handedly, but again with an air of condescension. "All the jutsus in the Academy handbook: Clones, substitution, transformation… just to name a few. They pick one at random so you have to know them all. If you can mold your chakra and perform the jutsu correctly in front of the examiners panel—which includes the Hokage, by the way—you qualify for Genin status, but *that* doesn't guarantee you a spot. Genin

instructors have their own tests—to test your caliber. Being a ninja isn't easy. Plenty of people don't make it."

"Don't listen to him," Amaya said quietly at his elbow. "He's just trying to intimidate you."

"No, he isn't," Haro said, and turned his glower on Itachi. "Not entirely. An outsider like you is almost unheard of. You don't know anything about what it means to be a ninja. I don't understand why they even let you in here."

Itachi felt himself bristling, but he didn't say anything. Why did he bother trying to help this kid? He should have just stayed out of it.

Yukio smirked. "For once, I agree with Haro. It will be a miracle if you make it Genin. But if you do,"-he grinned menacingly-"you'll still fail."

"Konohamaru's coming!" Michiko whispered.

"Move," Haro snapped, and gestured to an empty seat further down the row. "You're in my seat."

Itachi slid over, not knowing what else to do since his attempt at making friends hadn't been very successful. Haro occupied Itachi's former seat next to Amaya, glowering at him over his arm, while Amaya avoided looking at either of them. She looked uncomfortable. Behind them, Yukio clambered off the desk and slid smoothly into his own chair.

A second later, the door to the classroom burst open for a second time. It slammed against the inside wall, admitting a young man dressed in a Shinobi's flak jacket with the Konoha forehead protector sitting askew on his head. "Sorry I'm late, everybody! Sit down. Get your books out. We're going to review the tiger sign and practice transformations today."

The recap lesson on the tiger sign was fast-paced and flurried. Itachi mostly blinked through it. In the second half, students were called to

pair up and perform the transformation jutsu by turning into the image of their partner. Itachi didn't have a partner. Haro partnered with Amaya and everyone else seemed to have someone they preferred working with.

It didn't really surprise Itachi that he was passed over but it made him feel even more insecure. He watched the other kids perform the jutsu and dragged his book out of his bag. He flipped through the chapters, read again about chakra manipulation, looked up Henge no Jutsu and practiced forming the tiger seal by himself.

He was too self-conscious to concentrate on molding chakra—which he wasn't at all sure he was doing right—and became frustrated and disheartened within a few minutes. He kept thinking of how many jutsus were listed as Academy level. He couldn't keep the hand signs straight, much less sequences of hand signs. Looking around the room, his problem was obvious.

He was the dumb kid.

Itachi closed the textbook. He had never been the dumb kid before. He was always the smart kid. At his old school, Jered Lassen—the boy he had punched for spreading rumors about his mother—had been the dumb kid. Jered was always mouthing off and getting in trouble. When he wasn't, he was quiet, like a lump in the back of the room that nobody noticed. Lassen's parents had come into money suddenly and had sent Jered to Itachi's private school with a great deal of expectation, but Jered hadn't been prepared for the rigor of the curriculum. He started out completely overwhelmed and just fell further and further behind. The more his parents expressed disappointment, the worse he fared. He was popular with the other kids, though, because he attracted so much attention for the outrageous things he said and did, but he was last in most of his classes. After awhile, he stopped trying to learn anything at all. Then he became a jerk.

I don't want to be like that , Itachi thought desperately *. I don't want to just give up. There has to be a way to catch up. If someone would*

just help me...

He looked around the room, but not with much hope. He had never helped Jered. Even when he used to sit next to the kid in math, he had just ignored him. Itachi had thought poorly of Jered's manners, and was contemptuous when he didn't seem to grasp what was simple. Jered just sat there, ignoring everyone and everything, counting the minutes until class ended.

Maybe Jered really hadn't been that dumb. Maybe he was just lost. And scared to fail. So he didn't try.

Taking a breath, Itachi opened his book again. He wouldn't fail for not trying. He reread the section and summarized it to himself to make sure he understood it. Molding chakra was about mixing physical and spiritual energy evenly. It was mediation, calm, control, and the expulsion of power through the formation of hand signs.

If he wanted to be a ninja, he couldn't be afraid of failure. The teacher—Konohamaru—was making rounds through the class, commenting on the students' progress and making suggestions to improve their technique. By the time Konohamaru got around to his side of the room, Itachi wanted to have something to show, even if it wasn't very good. If he managed to do something, anything, he would prove to himself, and everyone here, that he could at least learn.

Closing his eyes, Itachi formed the tiger sign. He breathed deeply, concentrating, calming himself until all that was in his head were the ideas he had read in the text. He imagined the flow of chakra and listened to his own heartbeat until he could hear the gentle throb of blood—of life—pumping through his veins. He counted the beats, concentrating, centralizing with the rhythm. Believing that he could do it, he visualized who he would transform into.

"Henge no Jutsu."

Nothing. He tried again. And again. He tried for twenty minutes, while the teacher made the rounds.

"Henge no Jutsu."

And then he felt it. A surge like the second wind he sometimes got whenever he did something dangerous. He opened his eyes.

Amaya was staring at him over Haro's shoulder. "You did it," she said, "Well, kind of."

Itachi looked at the window. He could barely see his reflection, but he smiled at what he saw. It wasn't a complete transformation—not even close—but he had gotten the hair right.

"Is that supposed to be me?" Yukio demanded from across the room. "What a joke!"

Amaya glanced at Yukio and leaned around Haro to wink at Itachi. "Yukio is the best in our year," she whispered, "and he's always been cocky. The minute he heard an Uchiha was joining our class, he started talking down about you. Don't worry. I think he's actually nervous you might have your namesake's talent."

At this unexpected compliment, Itachi's Henge fell apart in a puff. He stared in amazement at his own face in the window.

In the afternoon, Sakura brought Sasuke a fruit basket and set it on the table next to his hospital bed. He opened his eyes when she came in, leaning back against the pillow with the blankets pulled up around his chest as she checked his chart and then carefully unwound the bandages on his arms.

"You're healing nicely," she told him, turning his arms over carefully and tracing the bruised skin above the bone. "A night's rest did you good. You'll have to take it easy, though, okay? Stay in bed. I mean it. Your fractures are mending, but they're still tender."

He nodded. He didn't really need the reminder. He could feel how tender the bones were as she wound the gauze tightly back around them. All the same, he appreciated Sakura's concern, and her touch. There was something about the warmth, the softness of her hands, and the light in her eyes that eased him, that he needed, even if he didn't always admit it with words.

Sasuke didn't remember what happened after that last shock of wind struck him in the face. Naruto hadn't held back. The blow dropped him like a sledge hammer. Apparently, he'd been in and out of consciousness for a while. He woke up in the hospital, ravenous and wincing from bruises, multiple fractures, cuts, scrapes, broken ribs, and a demoralized ego, but was otherwise not too bad. Sakura had administered healing to his injuries, minimizing what would have been colossal damage otherwise. Naruto had visited him once in the morning to gloat a bit over his win and to check in on his health.

The Hokage was in the room again now, lounging against the wall on a swivel chair with a stack of papers on his lap. It was apparently a list of possible instructors to head the new Genin teams that would be formed from this year's graduated Academy students. Naruto chewed on the end of a pencil as he reviewed the list.

Sakura took the seat beside Sasuke and began carving one of the apples from the fruit basket into skinned slices.

"You don't have to do that," Sasuke told her.

"It's okay," she said. "I want to."

Naruto glanced up and grinned at both of them. "Sorry to beat you up so bad, Sasuke," he said.

"No, you're not." Sasuke didn't bother to hide his scowl.

"Well, you *could* have given in."

He smiled wryly. "I'll get you next time. As soon as I get out of here, I'm going to start training."

Sakura made an exasperated sound in her throat and shook the knife at both of them. "Don't you even think about it!"

A knock sounded at the door, followed by Tenten sticking her head into the room. "You wanted to see me, Naruto?"she asked.

"Yeah," Naruto said. "How did it go?"

She glanced at Sasuke in the bed and mouthed uncertainly. "Here?"

"Sure," Naruto told her.

Sasuke glared at Naruto from across the room, but didn't say anything. He knew what they were going to talk about. Tenten was on teaching rotation and those kids started ninja Academy today. Itachi's kids, he reminded himself. Naruto wanted to force him to hear about it.

He fought to control his feelings. He'd given those kids more thought since waking up in the hospital, in between thinking about why Naruto had beat him this match and what he would do next match to make sure it didn't happen again. There wasn't much else to do in a hospital except think.

As near as he could figure, judging by their ages, the boy would have been conceived sometime when Itachi was in Akatsuki and he was training with Orochimaru. The girl, if she was also Itachi's, must have been conceived not too long before Itachi's death.

Before I killed him , Sasuke reminded himself.

He struggled with it. The emptiness couldn't be filled. It wasn't guilt he struggled with. By all accounts, Itachi would have died anyway, and despite learning that his brother cared about him after all, and wanted to protect him, he was still the one that had killed their

parents, the whole clan, his dreams... Both things existed at once: the cruelty and murders right alongside the protection and love.

It was the ghost that haunted him. The memory. Hating his brother. Loving him. Missing him. Wanting to speak to him, shout at him until his voice was hoarse. Wondering how Itachi had lived with himself. How he had lived at all. Wondering if anything might have been different if he lived a little longer. All these years, ever since he discovered the true reason for the killings, he told himself that Itachi must have been miserable, must have struggled to live as long as he did, must have pushed Sasuke to hate him with such cruelty because it was so hard to wait and time was running out.

And now there were *kids* ? He couldn't wrap his head around it.

"Rina's a doll," Tenten said, coming inside the room fully and shutting the door behind her. "Physically, she's petite and not very strong, but she listens and takes very neat notes. She didn't say much, but she paid attention. I gave a little quiz at the end and she got all the answers right."

"And Itachi?" Naruto said, sliding his eyes over to look at Sasuke.

"Well, I didn't have him, but Konohamaru says he's smart—and disciplined. He observed the kids a bit in secret before class began to see how he would be received and how he would react to the others. Itachi's got a lot of control over himself, a surprising amount for his age, even when Yukio got in his face."

"Ah, Yukio," Naruto said, crossing his arms and nodding. "Hmm."

"Right. Well, that's not even the most interesting thing. Itachi seemed to have done some studying already. He did a jutsu."

Sakura gasped. Naruto sat up straight in his seat. "What jutsu?" he asked.

"Henge," Tenten said, "and not very well. I mean, it was a terrible transformation according to Konohamaru, but still. He's had no training at all, and only a tiny bit of practice time. Most Academy students have to train their bodies and minds for years before they even start to mold chakra."

There was a moment of silence as everyone avoided looking at Sasuke. They were waiting for his commentary, but they were not sure if he would add anything.

Sasuke closed his eyes. "It's not that big a deal. I could do Goukakyuu no jutsu before I even started Academy training."

"Right, but you didn't teach it to yourself," Sakura pointed out, "and I'll bet you worked at it."

Sasuke scowled. "Itachi graduated Academy at age 7 and had the Sharingan by age 8. He was a Chuunin younger that this kid is now. What is so hard about Henge?"

"It's not *hard* ," Tenten said with a frown. "I know it's not. It's just surprising given his level. He's a complete novice, so he must have something of the Uchiha talent to do that much so fast. That's all I'm saying. I thought he might have to be held back to a younger class, but maybe not."

"We'll see," Sasuke said doubtfully.

It wasn't that he didn't believe it was possible. He did, in fact, believe it was quite possible. More importantly, if the boy had Uchiha blood, he might also have a Sharingan. The thought worried him. These kids, whoever they were, should never have come to Konoha. There was no reason for them to become ninja. They were outsiders. And their mother… Naruto's way of measuring her intentions was too lax and slow. There was too much they didn't know, and it might be important. Even if Naruto was patient and confident that they would learn more soon enough, Sasuke was not. He couldn't deny that kids

were Itachi's, but he didn't believe her story. He didn't trust her. He didn't like her.

"I can't really say I'm pleased about it," he said.

"You just don't want to accept him," Naruto accused from his seat in the corner. "Really, Sasuke. He's your family. Everything you're going through isn't his fault."

Sasuke sat up and glared at Naruto. It was hard not to grit his teeth. "Don't start this with me again, Naruto!" He fought down anger, anger that wasn't really directed at Naruto, or the kid, or anybody in particular. He was just angry. "It's not about me!" He leaned back against the pillows and stared at the ceiling.

It was about Itachi. It was about protecting his memory, about believing that his brother hadn't really been the evil thing that haunted Sasuke's world for seven years. That there were children, more than one from the same woman, was serious news, but he didn't trust that it was good news. All the pieces didn't add up.

Of course, Naruto didn't see it that way. If some kid showed up claiming to be related to Naruto, the Hokage would jump for joy. Sasuke wished it was that easy for him too, but it wasn't. He just didn't trust the woman, and even if her kids were innocent, he didn't want to get close to them. He had come a long way over the past years, but not that far.

"I get it," he informed them. "Really. I just don't want to talk about it until we know more. Leave it be."

He saw Sakura share a look with Naruto over his head and closed his eyes so he didn't have to see them having a silent conversation about him.

Tenten muttered something about having to find Neji and ducked out of the room. Sakura resumed cutting apples. Naruto sifted through the papers on his lap.

Sasuke wrestled with his thoughts. That woman. If he knew who she really was, if he understood better why she had even been with his brother, he might not distrust her so much. It was a gut reaction to be suspicious, he knew. It was a knee-jerk response to finding so suddenly that someone else in the world might have *known* Itachi—and in a way he didn't. But it wasn't that simple. Why had she brought those kids here? He couldn't believe that all of this was accidental. There had to be a reason.

Another knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

They all looked up to see Kiba standing in the doorway. "Hey, Naruto," he said. "I heard about your win. Congratulations!" He looked quickly at Sasuke. "Sorry," he added, and turned back to the Hokage. "I'm pretty tired, but I just wanted to let you know that we're back." He winked. "All of us."

Naruto's face lit up like a lamp. He scrambled off his chair, barely suppressing a grin. "Thanks, Kiba. We'll have to debrief."

Sasuke nodded. Hinata was back then. Good. Nothing was going to keep Naruto from finding her and leaving him alone for awhile. It would give him some time.

Naruto paused at the door, stack of papers in hand. "Sasuke, just… think about it some more, okay? Get some rest."

Naruto darted out of the room.

Sakura remained behind. "Do you want to talk?" she asked him.

"Thanks," he said, "but no. I'm fine. I just want to be alone for a little while."

Nodding, Sakura leaned over the bed to kiss him. He accepted her kiss gratefully, soothed by the touch of her lips. She didn't agree with him, but she still loved him. It was a comfort. She left the sliced apples at his bedside before leaving the room.

He stared at the apple slices for awhile after she had gone, knowing he should probably eat them, but he just wasn't hungry. Instead, he flung back the covers and got shakily to his feet, ignoring the pain in his ribs and arms. He walked across the room and pulled his robe off from the coat rack in the corner.

There was something important he had to do.

It was evening.

Her children weren't home yet, but Lucia didn't worry. Ino had stopped by to inform her that they had been seen together in the school yard after hours. Her son was apparently practicing a jutsu. It made her smile.

Incredible.

She was in her bedroom, mentally re-tallying her expenses on the dais next to the window, figuring how long they could subsist before she must insist on making a trip to a bank. She had just settled on a speculative date when she realized she wasn't alone.

There had been no creak on the stairs to warn her, no puff or boom or swinging of the door. He just appeared out of nowhere, startling her in a way she hadn't been startled in years. At first, her heart raced, but she knew immediately who it was, and tried to relax.

"I thought you might come to see me," she said, and turned her head, "but not so soon."

Itachi Uchiha's younger brother stood in the shadow of her doorway. His chest was wrapped in bandages, and his arms in splints, a short-sleeved robe thrown over his shoulders and belted loosely at the waist, leaving his chest exposed. He stood upright, his face a mask she could not read.

"You look like you should be in a hospital," she told him. "Are you all right?"

"I just came from there. These injuries will heal."

But some others won't , she thought.

They stared at each other for a moment in silence. She knew why he was here.

"What do you want to know?" she asked. She sensed that he was going to be direct and tried to prepare herself for it. These were Shinobi. She had to be very careful.

"I want to know why you came here," Sasuke said, confirming her suspicion. "I want to know why you want those kids to be Shinobi. I want to know what you're after."

Those kids. She held her breath, waiting for it.

"And I want to know…" he paused, trailed off, and stared at the floorboards at a spot in the room between them. He seemed to wrestle with himself, struggling to say something aloud. She knew the feeling. It should be easy, but it wasn't. It was like screaming inside the skull. The more it mattered, the harder it was to voice.

She knew this confrontation must come eventually, but knowing hadn't prepared her any more than it had him. She thought about the worst that could happen and allowed herself to be afraid until she felt calm.

This young man must loathe the very sight of her. What must he think of a woman who had borne children by the murderer of his family—parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, an entire clan… She knew the story, if not the details, and had known it before she met Itachi Uchiha. That the murderer was his brother only made it more appalling. And to think that someone such as she would then have the audacity to come to his home, to drag up demons from his past

and to parade them in front of him… Atrocious. It wasn't her intention, but that could hardly make a difference.

"Why?" he asked finally. He seemed to fight with himself to say that much.

"Why what?" she asked quietly, not to agitate him, but because a conversation with this much poignancy required that she answer the right question.

"Why did it happen?" He looked away from her, out the window into the street, a mixture of pained emotions playing across his face in the shadows. "Of all the things that might have happened to him, children never crossed my mind. If you were a woman he loved…" But even as he said it, it was plain from his face that he could not fathom how that could be true. "And if you weren't…" Even more doubt there.

She caught herself trembling and wrapped her hands around her arms, gathering all her energy up against her heart by folding her arms under her breasts. She did not let it show on her face. "It's complicated," she said. But it wasn't, not really. "Does discussing it upset you?"

"Not as much as not knowing," he said quietly.

Obsession. She could understand that. He may not like hearing it, and was aware that he might not, but he still wanted to know, had to know. She wished she knew what he was searching for. Was it evidence to prove his brother's villainy, or just a reason for the children?

She took a deep breath and swung her feet off the dais. "Do you want some tea? We can talk in the kitchen."

She wasn't thirsty, and she doubted he was either, but she wanted something to do, something menial and affable that would slow the racing of her heart and mind. She didn't want to have this discussion.

In truth, she had been hoping Sasuke would despise her more than he wanted to talk to her, just so she would not have to have this discussion.

"No," he said. "I just want answers."

His expression was so long and full of sadness that it pained her.

"You must hate me," she said. She didn't feel resentment. In truth, it wouldn't matter to her if she was hated. She would welcome hate. But she didn't want to hurt anyone else, not if she could help it.

"No. Just explain to me why and I'll leave you alone."

She nodded, lowered her hands in her lap, and closed her eyes. "As I told your Hokage, when I met Itachi Uchiha, I was in the Fire Country on business, but I was looking for someone like him. I wanted a baby by a rogue Shinobi."

"Why?"

"I was married," she said. "I've been married since I was sixteen, but I didn't want a baby by my husband." She had to keep a grip on herself. He didn't need to know everything. *Stop being emotional* , she told herself. Amazingly, it worked. When she opened her eyes and faced him, she felt calm. "I wanted it to be a Shinobi's, but I didn't want a father that would be involved. I decided it would be best if it was someone who either wouldn't care or wouldn't live long enough to interfere."

There was a slight hitch in Sasuke's breathing. "How did you expect to find rogue ninja?"

"I had a bingo book."

He stared at her.

"It wasn't mine," she said. "It belonged to a Shinobi I once knew, one that had done work for my father. It was old and out of date, but your

brother was in it, along with many others. There were a few to pick from, and I put myself in places where I might run into these. I had my own contacts. When I ran into your brother, he was with his partner, Kisame, traveling I don't know where. The encounter was brief. It didn't mean anything."

She looked away.

"Why would he do that?" Sasuke demanded.

Her eyes flickered back to his. "Why not?" she asked him. "It was a lonely life Itachi led, an isolated life. I'm sure he could have passed. I have no doubt of that. He didn't care for exposure, or complication, but I wasn't a risk to either of those things, so why not? I was not a ninja. I wasn't staying in the country. And," she smiled, "I was young and beautiful. I offered. All he had to do was accept."

Sasuke's face revealed nothing.

"It's vain, I know," she said, "but I have always been so."

Sasuke passed over this. "So he didn't intend to give you a baby."

"No, but why should he care if I had one?" she said. "I don't even know if he realized. That was what *I* wanted. When I had what I wanted, I left."

"But you saw him again?" Sasuke pressed.

Of course, she realized. This was what really puzzled him. It wasn't the accident of one child, but that there might be two. That indicated that she had had a relationship with his brother, and it was that possibility that bothered him so immensely. That meant she couldn't get away with just telling him the shallow details. He wanted to know more, and he would keep digging until he had what he wanted. She tried to stay calm.

"Yes, over a year later. I didn't expect to see him again. When I did, it was…" she trailed off.

"What?"

"A surprise."

"And was this another brief encounter?"

Perhaps she should lie, but she didn't. "No."

"You had an affair?"

"I don't know if I would call it an affair. I was here for business. I had a purpose. It was-" She looked away, thinking about the consequences of the truth. She had to say this. It was what he really wanted to know: Why. "Thrilling."

"Thrilling?"

She gave him a level look. Time spaced out between them, ticking by in measured seconds. She could not feel her heart. She knew it still there, beating out the seconds of her life, but it seemed to have become a dead weight in her chest. "I have a problem," she confessed, "with dangerous men. I wanted to feel frightened." She saw his eyes widen. "I like to be hurt."

The expression on Sasuke's face twisted. It smote her like a physical blow. She could see the thoughts storming in his head behind those black eyes. Masochism was the clinical word for it, but it was more complicated than that. "He hurt you?" he demanded.

She didn't know what to say because she didn't know what he wanted to hear. "He didn't do anything I didn't want him to do."

"You *made* him hurt you?" He looked like he was going to be ill. She had said the wrong thing. He was disgusted with her now, and yet unable to look away or to leave. Still, she preferred disgust. It was

better, cleaner, than what he might think of her if he knew everything. "And you used him to further your own ends. You're…!"

"I didn't *make* him," she objected. It was more confusing than he could possibly guess.

"Did you *ask* him to hurt you?"

She couldn't deny that she had. She remembered it with accuracy. It was never a gross amount of pain, not in the beginning, but enough to frighten and control her. He had been so good at it. So good that-

Sasuke was furious now. She could see it in his expression. For a moment, she thought he was going to cross the room and strike her, but he didn't do anything. He just stood in the doorway, trembling, his eyes blazing. "You made us believe your husband was the monster, but you…!"

"Gehard is abusive," she said. "Just because I like to be hurt doesn't change what it is."

"And you're saying that Itachi… you liked that he was a murderer? You went after him because he was?"

"I don't like murder. I liked that Itachi had no attachments. I was looking for a rogue ninja, not a killer, just as I told you. That he was dangerous added to his appeal, but…" She shook her head. "It didn't last."

"The appeal?"

"The violence."

"What do you mean?"

"There came a time when he wouldn't do it," she explained. "I don't know what happened. At first it was fine and then it wasn't." Looking into Sasuke's face, she could see that she had struck a chord. It was like Itachi was two different people, but she knew it was the same

man. Sasuke must have known something of that too. "I continued seeing him anyway."

A half truth. He kept showing up at her door. He never spoke about his life, never told her why he came. He just showed up and she couldn't turn him away. He exerted some kind of control over her that was just as addictive as pain had always been—more so. When he appeared, she didn't ask for anything. She just played his game and made the hours he spent in her company as pleasant as possible and tried not to feel any attachment to the illusion. The sexual part was easiest to explain. It was everything else that she could not tell Sasuke. She didn't know what it made her. Something worse than what she had been before.

She didn't dare reveal any details. Sasuke would dismiss her if he assumed she served a function and little else. Men always accepted and dismissed that women were pleasurable. Besides, it was more or less true, and she could handle being ignored. What she couldn't imagine was what he would think or do to her if he thought otherwise. She would rather he despise her for a warped sexual fetish than try to make sense of her relationship with the man who had murdered his family. She had no doubts that the story was true. Sasuke already didn't trust her, and she didn't blame him for that, but if he thought she had been emotionally involved, she feared she would not be safe.

"Wait." Sasuke's voice was scratched with desperation. "He was cruel? He hurt you?"

"Yes."

"And *then* not?"

"Yes." Had he thought it would be the other way around?

He squeezed his eyes shut. "And then?"

"We were involved for awhile longer, but it became too dangerous."

A partial lie.

"Dangerous? I thought you liked danger?"

"Yes, in the bedroom, but not from his group."

"Akatsuki?" he breathed, his eyes snapping open.

She nodded. "I left before it could become an issue. The next time I saw Itachi, he was…ill. And then I received word that he was dead. I went home. Gehard was furious that I had been gone for as long as I had. His anger was… hard on me. A few weeks later, I found out I was pregnant, but I didn't know from when."

Sasuke's face turned white as a sheet. He seemed to struggle with himself. "You…. You initiated all of this just for a child that was not your husband's?"

"Yes," she said, "As long as it was a Shinobi's child."

He regarded her for a moment in silence. "I don't believe you," he said. "You're lying about something, or keeping something back. Your children…" He was clearly appalled.

"They are innocent of all of this," she told him. "I don't want them to be like me. I have always kept them away from it, as much as I could, and away from Gehard. Itachi Uchiha never knew them, and I have never hurt them. Before the incident that forced us to come here, Gehard never had either. It was just me he liked to hurt."

And he had hurt her any way he could: with blows, other women, words—she welcomed it all. Gehard believed that such things controlled her and she wanted him to think that was true. She welcomed it moreover as evidence that there was something wrong inside of her. By Sasuke's face, she could tell that he did not understand. She didn't expect him to.

"I don't feel any pleasure from hurting others," she continued, "and I don't want any of this for my children. I don't want them to be violent. I don't want them to like violence."

"Then why did you choose a Shinobi? Why are you making them *be* Shinobi?" he demanded. "There is no path more violent than that one!"

"Because I want them to be protected," she said patiently. "You haven't asked *why* I like it. Don't you think there's a reason that violence appeals to me?"

He stared at her. "I can only assume there is violence in your history. Did your parents hurt you? Is that supposed to be an excuse?"

"No," she said. "My parents never hurt me."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"My father was murdered. That's why I had to get married so fast. As soon as I was married, my mother killed herself. She was afraid, you see…" Lucia stopped speaking, overwhelmed by sudden emotion. One lie would beget another life but she couldn't avoid that. She forced her fear down to a dull buzz. "Someday, my children will be at risk. They need to be able to protect themselves."

"From your husband? Gehard? Is he really such a threatening person?"

She closed her eyes. "Gehard is not the one I'm worried about."

That was true enough. Sasuke waited.

Lucia took a deep breath, thinking of how to phrase it. "I told the Hokage I learned about Shinobi from my father. That was true, but the Shinobi I knew weren't all bodyguards. My father had other contracts with Shinobi. S level contracts."

Realization dawned on Sasuke's face. "If you or your children are targets for assassination, you should have told us up front! You should have told it to Naruto. If those kids put anyone in Konoha in danger…"

"They won't," she said. "I told your Hokage the truth. They are not targets. Not yet. They aren't worth a thing to anybody right now, living or dead. As long as they are in a village surrounded by Shinobi, they are safe from Gehard and anyone else who might want to hurt them."

"Why aren't they targets now?"

"They haven't inherited anything yet," she said, "but some day they will."

Sasuke shook his head as if to clear it. "I must tell Naruto about this." He was plainly agitated. "Will you confirm this for the Hokage?"

"I will," she said, "if I must. Will I be allowed to stay here if I do?"

With a shake of his head, he turned away from her. "Probably." She thought she saw him grimace.

"Will you tell your Hokage everything?"

He paused, seeming to consider this. "Yes. I have to tell him about your involvement with Shinobi," Sasuke informed her, "and your father's. We will investigate."

"I know," she said smoothly.

He left her then, both hands curled into fists. There was pain evident all throughout his body in the tenseness of his muscles.

Lucia bit her lip, watching him go, wishing there was something to her story that didn't make her horrible, but she couldn't think of anything. She was silent when she heard the door open and shut. A

moment later, she heard her son's voice calling her, but she still wasn't able to speak.

Itachi nearly bumped into Sasuke outside his door. As his uncle strode through it, Itachi scrambled backward from the doorstep and almost knocked over Rina in the process.

"Sasuke!" he breathed reflexively, such excitement coursing through him that he forgot to add any honoraries. His uncle was wrapped in bandages, but not nearly so injured as he might have guessed. "I saw your match. Did you come to see me?" he asked hopefully.

Moonlight bathed his uncle's face in a silvery glow that made his features look carved from marble, but his eyes were shadowed, blending with the darkness in the air around them. There was a harrowed look about those eyes, as if he were living nightmares while awake.

Until that moment, the tiny, pleasant chirps of night bugs had accompanied Itachi and Rina all the way home. Now the insects could not be heard. As if sensing an enormous threat from Sasuke's presence, every creature crouched in the stillness and tried not to be noticed.

Itachi's heart beat dully in his chest. "I did a jutsu today," he said. "Do you…?"

When Sasuke looked at him, Itachi stammered and fell silent. It was like his dream, but his uncle's eyes were sharper than any sword. They were full of horror and loathing, abhorring the sight in front of him as though it were monstrous. Itachi trembled under that stare, unconsciously stepping in front of Rina to shield her, overwhelmed with a flood of feelings he didn't understand. "I'm sorry," he blurted, though he didn't know what for. Before that stare, it was as if his very existence should be a regret.

Sasuke's eyes passed over him as if he were a ghost or a mirage. He walked by them without speaking.

Itachi stood shaking in his wake. He felt Rina slip her hand into his and clasped it just to feel something real. He watched Sasuke's retreating back, then looked at the door of his new house.

A new house, but the same resident. What had she told him?

"Itachi," Rina bleated. The sound was like that of a lamb. "Does Sasuke hate us?"

He immediately shored up his feelings. He squeezed her hand. "It's okay," he told her, putting as much reassurance into his tone as he could muster. "But I don't think graduating Academy is going to be enough anymore. That Henge jutsu isn't much. I've got to do something more."

He had to do something amazing, he thought abstractly, desperately. He had to *be* something incredible. If he could just get past the hurdles, he could overcome all the bad things, outshine it until all the shadows in his mother's history, Gehard's history, the Van Alstyne history—disappeared. He could have everything he wanted, but Henge wasn't enough to get him there. He needed jutsu that would impress, requiring something like twenty hand signs to complete. He had no idea how to learn that, but he had to do something. And he absolutely had to graduate.

"Come on," he told his sister. "It's all going to be fine." He took a deep breath as he opened the door and ushered Rina in before him. He looked up the stairs.

"Mom?"

There was no answer.

"I'll make you dinner," he said to Rina. "And then we'll study, okay? Maybe work on your music piece a little?"

She nodded.

No problem. He'd take care of everything.

TBC

R&R! (It does not mean "read and run.") Thank you!

Chapter 7

These chapters are long (over 12,000 words again)! That's why it takes so long to update. That, and the complication of the story. I've actually been writing this…near constantly it feels like. But I kept rewriting, because I didn't like it. A big thank you to everyone who reviewed and especially to Satoshii for recommending this fic to others! I really appreciate it! A big thanks also to you lurkers who crawled out to give a wave and a nod. Thank you thank you thank you!

Warnings : This fanfic is for 16+ readers (rated M). It contains sexual references , mature themes (including sado-masochism...described vaguely but not "shown"), some violence, a very little bit of swearing, and other material. , This fic FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES for this site so please do not report it as MA. There are no explicit sex scenes. All such scenes "cut off" before anything happens. Violence is typical for a story about ninjas. There isn't anything extremely disturbing described in any detail.

White Rain

Chapter 7

By Zapenstap

Lucia hadn't left her room. All night she leaned against the headboard of the bed, not quite under the covers and not quite on top of them, drifting between sleeping and waking. Her feet stuck out in the open, bare and cold to where her knees bent under the sheets. She didn't feel it.

Rina and Itachi were at school. Her son knocked on her door in the morning, but he didn't come in. Instead, he spoke quietly through the door. He told her he had done a jutsu, that Rina made a friend, that

they had eaten breakfast already, and that they were both going back to school again today. His tone carried hopeful, muted excitement mixed with anxiousness. So positive. Her heart fluttered with pride, and she almost told him to come in, but she couldn't voice it. When she didn't answer, he told her not to worry about anything. He would be home before dark.

Lucia drifted between listlessness and agony. She knew she should be the one telling her children not to worry. Itachi was capable on his own, but that only made it worse. He would be fine, and because of that, she had the excuse she needed to do nothing. She felt numb. Maybe in a little while, she could be his mother, but for now...

Right now she couldn't remove the assaulting look in Sasuke's eyes from her mind, not because of Sasuke, but because of the questions he had unearthed.

You made *him hurt you?*

Yes, she had certainly asked for it. Itachi Uchiha. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. She had sought a true sadist. She had not been interested in games or power plays. She wanted to feel real fear. He had been excellent at it. She remembered it clearly. At the time, she had rationalized that it was… not destiny, exactly, but appropriate. She wanted pain. He was masterful at inflicting pain. It seemed to make sense in a senseless world, but…

Was it possible she had him wrong?

She buried her head in her arms. She *remembered* that he had been good at hurting her and assumed he had enjoyed it. But memories were not facts. Memories were feelings and images, impressions really. The manner in which she recalled them, as well as what she recalled, seemed to depend on her mood. She could not stop remembering, and each time she remembered it differently.

She remembered his smirk, his confidence. Itachi had shocked her, frightened her, made her scream, but it struck her now as curious

that he never struggled with control. Sadists always wanted to push the boundaries, trying to break the barrier between fantasy and reality to satisfy a monstrous human desire: the desire to hurt another human being, to torture another human being, for no reason than because it was possible, and because the thrill of abject cruelty was so empowering. With a willing victim, most sadists started small and gradually lost more and more control. Eventually they went too far, but Itachi never did. Half the time the things she thought he did to her were just an illusion, muddled with genjutsu, though the pain was no less real to her.

Surely she could not be mistaken to his character. He was a murderer. He killed his own family in cold blood. It was rumored that he was cruel in combat, that he had destroyed men by looking at them; she did not think they were exaggerations.

She had liked him. And hated herself for it.

But what had she liked? Itachi had pretended to be so many different things, had manipulated her to believe so many different things, that she had stopped trying to distinguish between fantasy and reality, especially where he was concerned. She accepted only that she was attracted to him, and let sleeping lions lie.

Their time together wasn't always painful. It was also passionate. He had been so hungry for touch.

And that day when it snowed…

She closed her eyes and hid them in the crook of elbow. It didn't make sense, but if somehow she had it wrong, then she had done a very terrible thing.

The sun rose halfway up into a bright blue sky as Naruto led Hinata up through the narrow forest paths to his secret spot. Her hand was cold in his, chilled by the brisk mountain air, despite the fluffy coat

that draped her shoulders to hips, but she smiled at him when he looked back at her, eyes alight with curiosity.

He had missed her while she had been away, but he tried to keep a stoic face about it and talk about her as little as possible so as not to make everyone around him throw up. The trouble with love was that he had to try hard to care if it made everyone vomit. Loving Hinata was easy, like loving ramen; he wanted it all the time.

"Almost there," he promised.

He pulled on her arm and they trotted up the last bit of path. The trees that had been their only companions along the way grew sparser and sparser until all at once they dropped away completely. In front of them, the trail they had been climbing leveled out into a summit covered in mountain grass and wild flowers of yellow, purple, pink, and white. Between them and the edge of the cliff just beyond was nothing but wild mountain grass and flowers underfoot and blue sky above.

"How beautiful!" Hinata breathed.

Naruto grinned and let the tips of her fingers slip from his as he darted forward, turning to spread his arms wide. "Come look!" he said, gesturing to the edge of the cliff behind his heels. "This is my special place. You'll see why. You're going to love it."

Hinata's eyes drifted upward, first to his face, and then beyond it as she drew closer. He watched, brimming with the urge to grab her and tell her what he came here to tell her, but he enjoyed watching her face light up at what she saw just beyond the lip of the cliff.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "It's Konoha!" She peered down at the village sprawling below them. "We're on the Hokage mountain." She looked right and left and finally at him. "Wait a minute. Are we on your head?"

"Yep," Naruto said proudly. "Well, close to it. It's a secret, so don't tell anyone." Hinata looked behind them. The trees surrounded this little place in the world like a meadow in a forest. He sidled close to her and whispered softly in her ear. "Pretty great, huh?"

She laughed. The sound skipped through the air like the tingling of bells. Naruto hovered close, not quite touching her, but near enough to look deeply into her eyes. When the sound subsided, they stood together in silence.

Their relationship was a little complicated. Hinata's family was fiercely protective of their lineage and a little unsure about what to do about Naruto's interest in their heir. He thought he had worked out a solution to the problem, but needed Neji to hurry up and make a claim on his rights to the Main Branch, or not. Hinata could then abdicate, or not. Either way, Naruto could then heap honors on her head by marrying her to the Hokage. Then no one would mind that it wasn't traditional. Her immediate family was pleased by the prospect—he had asked-but the whole situation made Hinata nervous. It was just a matter of time, though.

A gust of wind blew past, tossing the tops of the flowers around their feet and ruffling the hair on Naruto's head. Hinata's dark hair flowed around her oval face like ribbons of ink or oil, catching every ray of light as she turned her gaze on him. A line of pink suffused her pale cheeks with a rosy hue. Naruto felt his heart beat quicken. She looked into his face, right into his eyes, and her lashes lowered coyly.

He edged closer before she could give him her "come hither" look. With just the two of them on top of the world—their part of the world anyway—it was a great kissing moment. He had planned it precisely with the hope that great kissing moments would be had in abundance. He waited until her eyelashes fluttered and lifted contritely, revealing luminous depths that saw only him. Then he reached with his other hand to take her chin, turn it just slightly, and…

"Naruto!"

Damn it! This was supposed to be his *secret* spot.

Naruto pulled his head back from Hinata, whose face had flushed bright crimson. He turned to see Sasuke climbing up the path. Sasuke's face was haggard and pale, almost bloodless. He was still bandaged around the arms and chest, heaving for breath as he walked. He looked half dead.

Hinata disengaged Naruto's hand from her hip. "Are you all right?" she asked Sasuke hesitantly. She never knew quite how to address him, but Naruto's concerns were her concerns too. She half stepped toward him, but he held out a hand to forestall her.

"I'm fine."

"You're supposed to be in the hospital," Naruto said. "What are you doing climbing mountains?"

Sasuke stopped at the edge of the tree line. "I need to speak with you right away."

"You look like you've been up all night," Naruto added suspiciously.

"I couldn't sleep."

"What did you do?"

They stared at each other across the grass. Sasuke's jaw was tense, his teeth clamped tightly so that the muscles flexed without his seeming to be aware of it. He didn't seem to notice the way he was breathing either, or how ragged he looked, leaning slightly to one side as if his ribs pained him, his muscles shaking slightly. Emotionally, Naruto sensed what could not be seen: anxiety, depression, urgency, and cold anger. Sasuke's chakra was laced with it.

"It's about Lucia," Sasuke said.

Naruto cast a sideways look at Hinata. "Hinata," he said, with more regret than he could possibly convey. "I'm so sorry, but I think this is important Hokage business." He kept his tone as even he could manage, trying not to alert Sasuke with what he was feeling, or make Hinata think he was angry at all with her. "Could you find Sakura for me and tell her how to get up here? "

"Of cour—" Hinanta began.

"Sakura doesn't need to be involved in this," Sasuke interrupted. "I'm fine. I just need to tell you what I found out."

Naruto crossed his arms. Sasuke had it wrong. Naruto didn't want Sakura's presence for her medical jutsu, though Sasuke looked like he might need it. Naruto wanted Sakura because Sasuke would be calmer if she was near. They would both be calmer. Naruto kept a reign on the anger rising from his gut, but with difficulty. He turned to Hinata. "Please," he said, and smiled a little just for her. "I'll find you later. I promise."

She smiled back at him, believing in him with such faith it made his chest ache. He would find her later definitely, and make it worth the wait. Hinata's eyes darted carefully between him and Sasuke, and Naruto had no doubt she sensed his anger as well as the mess that was Sasuke's emotional makeup. She didn't hesitate. She turned and darted down the hill.

When Hinata was out of earshot, Sasuke opened his mouth, but Naruto forestalled him.

"You talked to Lucia?" he questioned.

"Yes."

"On your own?"

At the slight growl in Naruto's voice, doubt crept into Sasuke's face, but he didn't hedge away or back down. He stared at Naruto

defiantly, right in the eye. "Last night."

"In her *home* ?"

"Yes."

Naruto drew in a deep breath. Sasuke had told him directly that he *didn't* want to talk to the woman, and since he had been laid up in the hospital, Naruto hadn't bothered him about it. Now he admitted to breaking into the woman's house, and threatening her by the sound of it. He apparently saw nothing the matter with that at all.

"She is a guest here," Naruto said. "Do you want to explain to me what you were thinking?"

"She lied to us," Sasuke said. His tone was imperious. His expression was flat and cool as a statue's. "I would think that is more important than making her comfortable."

Naruto could see that Sasuke was suffering. His friend may seem cold, but the more pain he was in, the harder Sasuke always looked, like he thought he could hold the whole world together by flexing all his muscles at once. In contrast, Naruto didn't bother to reign in his emotions at all. "Damn it, Sasuke! You should know better!"

"Why are you angry with *me* ?" Sasuke asked, still in cold tones. "I didn't do anything wrong. It's her that you—"

Naruto wanted to sock his friend in the face, if just to break that icy veneer. "You *did* do something wrong! You broke into the private home of my guest. *My guest* , Sasuke!"

"She's not-" Sasuke began, then stopped suddenly. He set his face stubbornly, jaw clamping down as if chewing a rock.

"Yes. *My guest* . Don't you see?" Naruto said. "I welcomed her here. I told all the Jounin she was to be protected. I know you are upset by all of this, but not everything is about *you* ."

"Don't you even want to know what I learned?" Sasuke demanded. "Don't you care that she *lied* to us? How do you know she even deserves our protection? She could be a danger to us. This village. *Our* people. Shouldn't you care more about *them* ?"

Now Naruto was furious. "Of course I do! How can you even ask that? Stop making this about something that it isn't. I'm not defending her *over* the village and I'm not defending her over you! I'm trying to tell you-"

"It sure sounds like you are to me," Sasuke interrupted. "If you're going to jump all over me for offending her or badgering her or whatever your problem is when I have important information to tell you. As a Shinobi-"

Naruto wanted to pull his hair out. "As *Hokage* , I PROMISED her she would be *safe* !" Naruto shouted. "This isn't about Lucia! This is about *you* going over my head and doing whatever you damn well please when I specifically told you we were *not* going to pressure her. You think I didn't KNOW she lied to us? You think I was not aware the minute she showed up here that she was hiding something? It's completely obvious!" He gritted his teeth, jabbing a finger at his friend to drive the point home. "But you're the only one who thinks you have a right to interrogate her when I've already told you that is NOT how we are going to do things!"

"I didn't mean-!" Sasuke began, his voice cracking with bewilderment.

"By breaking into her house and threatening her, you are making a liar out of me! I take that personally, Sasuke!"

Sasuke pulled back, stunned. His cold mask dissolved, and all the hurt and pain and anger he was feeling bled through in an instant. Concentration broken, his eyes darted everywhere but Naruto's face. Naruto seethed a few moments longer. This was how it always was, not just with Sasuke, but in many of his dealings with Shinobi. In any tough situation, Shinobi were trained to block out emotion. Emotion

led to lack of control and lack of control led to rash decisions and stupid mistakes, but the right thing to do was control emotion, not block it out. Naruto didn't hold back when it was important. He dug in, pulled everything out into the open, and then let it go.

"I'm sorry this is hard for you," he said. "I know you don't agree with my decision, but it is *my* decision. I am Hokage. You are a Shinobi. You don't have to feel as I do, but you are bound to obey my directive whether you agree with it or not!"

Sasuke clearly didn't know what to say. "I just thought…"

"You didn't think," Naruto said. "You just *did* . I understand that you acted as you felt you had to, believe me, but I can't allow you to do whatever the hell you like. What will the others think? You make it look like you are above my authority, like you have a right to do things your own way because we have a history, and that makes me look bad."

Sasuke groaned. He squeezed his eyes shut, realizing, it seemed, why Naruto was so pissed.

"Don't you see? I have to *discipline* you now."

Sasuke opened his eyes. "All right. All right," he said. "You made your point. I wasn't thinking of *that* at all."

Naruto felt the rest of his anger drain out of him. It was exhausting being angry, especially with a friend he knew was suffering. He knew exactly why Sasuke had done it. It was the exact kind of thing he would have done himself in Sasuke's position, but things were different now that he was Hokage. He couldn't let Sasuke appear to have special privileges, not because he had a personal investment in the situation, and especially not because he was the Hokage's friend. By Sasuke's face, he understood; he really just hadn't thought about it like that.

"I'll take some kind of penance," Sasuke said. "Whatever you want, I'll do it, publically if you feel it's necessary. I won't give you a hard time about it."

"Great," Naruto muttered. "I don't know what it will be yet, but you make damn sure everybody knows it's coming. You won't like it either, whatever it is. I can't go easy on you."

Sasuke nodded, accepting that verdict with a grimace. "Whatever you want, but you should know that I'm not really sorry. I learned something important."

Naruto sighed. He could understand that too. Naruto had broken rules often enough himself, and with less reason. Sasuke must feel like it was worth it. Maybe he would have done it anyway.

"Whatever you found out, we would have found out," Naruto said, to impress on Sasuke that what he had done really wasn't necessary. He believed it too. They *would* have found out. The teams were already assembled; a plan was underway. "I'm not doing nothing about this, you know. I was going to talk to Lucia myself, just… not by breaking into her private home in the middle of the night."

Sasuke looked away.

"What *did* you want me to do?" Naruto asked. "Frighten her?"

"No," Sasuke said.

"Torture her?"

Sasuke closed his eyes. "No."

"I didn't question her right away because she has no reason to tell us everything up front. She's only been here one day! You have to try and see things from her point of view. She doesn't live here. She doesn't *know* us. She took a gamble in coming here in the first place, hoping we could protect her, but knowing we are Shinobi. What

would you have done if you were her? If you were a guest in a strange Shinobi village, would you tell them everything about *your* past? I'd rather she tell us her real story because she trusts us than because she fears us."

Sasuke winced. Naruto let it sink in. She *would* fear them now. Because of Sasuke's impatience, Lucia had every right to distrust them. She would be guarded. She might even see them as spies, after information at the cost of the informant, and nothing at all in it for her to cooperate any more than she was forced to. Any effort Naruto made to be friendly she would take with polite skepticism. With time, he might still win her over, but it wouldn't be easy. He would have to give her time.

He took a deep breath. "Tell me what you found out," he said. "I might as well hear it."

Whatever it was, it had clearly made Sasuke a mess. Sasuke opened his mouth to speak, contrition having replaced imperiousness, but stalled when Sakura charged up the mountain slope.

"Sasuke!" she gasped, concern flickering across her face as she saw the state he was in, not just the bandages, but the whole of him. She threw her arms around his neck, causing him to grunt as their chests collided. When Sakura pulled back, it was with a face full of fury. "What the *hell* are you doing out of bed?"

"Sasuke went to visit Lucia," Naruto informed Sakura, "and now he has something to share."

"You *what* ?" Sakura gasped. By the tightness in her face, she seemed heartbeats from swatting him in the back of the head. She held off, though. Sasuke looked like a tap from the wrong direction might send him sprawling. Instead, she began fussing with his bandages.

Sasuke stilled her hands and turned to Naruto. "Lucia knew about Itachi because she had a bingo book."

Naruto stared. So did Sakura.

"It was her father's. Whatever he was involved in, he didn't survive it. When he was killed, Lucia had to get married. Something to do with an inheritance. You will have to ask questions about that. I was a bit…distracted at that point. I asked her why she brought her kids here. She told me that they will be targeted, not now, but whenever her inheritance passes to them. She planned to bring them here on purpose. She wants them to be Shinobi. She's not running only from her husband."

Naruto whistled through his teeth.

"There's more," Sasuke said, "maybe not as important to the village, but it's important to me." He swallowed. "She said that she likes pain."

"What does that mean?" Sakura whispered, pulling back from him to look into his face.

"She said that Itachi…" He stopped, gathered himself together, and started again. "She implied he was some kind of sadist, and that that was the reason she continued to see him, past the first child. I guess she was looking for…someone like that."

Naruto didn't say anything at first. "So that would make her a-" He paused, searching for the word.

"Masochist," Sakura whispered. "I called *you* that once, remember?"

Naruto did remember. When they were kid Genin on their first real mission, he had stabbed his hand and made a vow. Sakura had called him a masochist. It didn't seem funny now.

"I just don't understand any of this," Sasuke said. "Itachi was…" He shook his head and started over. "If I had heard this years ago I would have no trouble believing it. I believed such awful things about him for so long. But I never imagined that there could have been a woman of any significance, and especially not kids. I just can't see how that would be possible. He killed everyone he loved. Everyone. Except me. If there had been someone else to live for…"

"No one said he loved her," Sakura interrupted, though it was plain by her voice that she was almost as bothered as Sasuke. "Certainly not more than he loved you."

"I still don't understand," Sasuke said. "It must have been hell. Itachi's whole life, since he was twelve or thirteen, it must have been a nightmare. A waking nightmare. It makes me sick to think about what it must have been like."

Naruto could also imagine. Living a Shinobi's life as Itachi had lived it was soul-sundering. Killing because you were ordered, and killing people you cared for especially, people you loved, your own family… It was that kind of thing that Naruto had become Hokage to change.

Sasuke choked on his own voice. "He smiled at me when he died. Did I tell you that?" He looked at Sakura. Her face was stunned. "He smiled like I was doing him a favor." He pushed his fingers against his forehead.

Naruto didn't say anything. He knew that Sasuke's memory of his brother hovered in his mind always, awake or asleep, eyes open or closed. It was as if Itachi's ghost clung to him like a mist. Naruto felt it, indirectly and without feeling it personally, but he saw it in Sasuke and felt some of what he was feeling because he loved his friend. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked at the ground beneath his feet, a lump forming in his throat.

"Maybe," Naruto said slowly. "Maybe a woman was a comfort to him while he was alive."

"But not *any* woman," Sakura muttered. "A rogue Shinobi like Itachi would have to be careful. Perhaps a good woman…" She stopped herself, frowning. "Well, maybe any woman not part of the Shinobi world, by that virtue alone, would be good."

Sasuke shook his head. "I thought of that. As soon as she showed up here, I thought that had to be it. It was the only thing that made any sense. It's ordinary, isn't it? It's easy to understand. Any ordinary man would want a woman. And by all accounts, she was the aggressor. It's the reason *she* gave, and it makes sense."

"But Itachi wasn't ordinary," Sakura said slowly. "He was an elite ninja, one of the best. He was rogue, a member of Akatsuki, an Uchiha, and given what he did..." She stopped.

Sasuke clenched his fists. "I *know* all that, but deep inside I think maybe he *wanted* to be ordinary. Itachi didn't want the life he had, and I don't just mean Akatsuki. Maybe he didn't want to be a Shinobi at all. Maybe he did it because of duty, because it was expected of him, maybe because there was no one else."

Naruto nodded. By military standards, Itachi had been perfect. That the heart of someone so dedicated to others had been betrayed and blighted and finally destroyed, that such talent had gone to such horrific waste without a word of protest on his behalf, made Naruto angry on principle, even now.

Sasuke, of course, had never stopped being angry—not really. The loss was too great. He merely coped with it, a little better each day, and tried his best not to take it out on others. Sasuke took a deep breath and continued. "I hated him for so long. I couldn't really see him at all. I don't think he wanted me to. When I think how he must have suffered, I can't imagine how he managed to live. I think that was what killed him really—the stress of just surviving."

Sasuke stared down at his feet, teeth clenched, fingers half curled into fists. Sakura hovered beside him. She was ready to leap if he

needed her, but at a loss for what to do otherwise. There wasn't really anything she could do.

"Itachi's heart died the night of the massacre," Sasuke said, "and his body started to decay after that. I think he survived just long enough to fight me, to give me the satisfaction of killing him, so that I might have some happiness in avenging…" He swallowed, unable to finish.

Sasuke broke off. Naruto didn't comfort him. Neither did Sakura. Sasuke didn't want comfort. He was trying to work past a familiar pain. Naruto had heard all of this before, but he listened as many times as Sasuke could bring himself to speak of it. When Sasuke began again, his voice was thicker, but his eyes remained dry. The tears had burned out a long time ago.

"He took it all as a duty, but it must have been hell. Maybe he would welcome anything that could distract him."

"A beautiful woman would be a fine distraction," Naruto agreed.

"Yes. That's what I thought. Itachi always struck me as particular, but looking at it that way… well, a beautiful woman, one who didn't ask questions, makes some sense. But this woman…" He lifted his head. "I'll admit that she's easy on the eyes, but if she *made* him hurt her, or if he *wanted* to hurt her…Don't you see?"

Naruto couldn't deny that he did. He could follow Sasuke's line of thought easily enough. If all Itachi sought in a woman was respite—a bit of comfort in an otherwise mad, painful world—only to have pain follow him there, demanded of him there… then that bit of heaven would become another hell.

"But…" Naruto protested, his brow crinkling with thought.

Was Itachi a sadist? They were all thinking it, rolling it around in their heads, trying it on for size, because it mattered to Sasuke. Naruto had personally seen Itachi inflict pain and smile while doing it. Naruto was there when Itachi tortured Sasuke, physically and emotionally

into a comatose state. He had seen the effects of the Mangekyou Sharingan on Kakashi. As a group, Akatsuki members had butchered countless good people, and all of Konoha's intelligence on Itachi indicated that he had been known especially for cruelty. Even if the Uchiha massacre had been carried out on orders, was it possible it was also a *delight,* on some twisted level? A nightmare indeed.

"Is she lying?" Sasuke gasped. "Or was I wrong about him? All this time I was thinking, hoping, that I was wrong *before* , that Itachi was not the person I hated and wanted to kill, that he didn't deserve what happened to him. And now I don't know. But either way…" He trailed off.

He didn't need to finish. Naruto was able to fill in the blanks. Either Itachi was a sadist or he was a good man forced into that role by a masochist. Either way, the conclusion was painful. Sasuke head's drooped forward. He breathed deeply, eyes closed, chest rising and falling. Naruto didn't say anything. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"We need to get you back to the hospital," Sakura said. She reached up to rest her hands gently on Sasuke's shoulders. He curled his fingers around hers, but couldn't meet her eyes. "Please," she said, trying to coax him to look at her. "Don't worry so much. Maybe it isn't what you think. Maybe…" She trailed off.

"You think there could be another explanation?" Sasuke asked her, not with derision, but with actual hopefulness. He wanted it to be true. He wanted them, either of them, to give him something that would help.

"I don't know," Sakura admitted softly.

"If there is," Naruto said firmly. "We'll learn it. Sasuke, you have to promise me you will leave her alone."

Sasuke nodded.

"Her kids too."

"All right."

Naruto took a deep breath. "If those kids become Genin," he said, "then they'll be Leaf ninja. Can you accept that?"

Sasuke looked at the ground. "I don't hate *them* . I wish they weren't here, but I won't bother them."

Naruto blew out his cheeks. That wasn't what he wanted, but he could try to be patient. Regrettably, he would have to leave them alone too, at least for a little while. It killed him. He wanted to get to know Itachi's kids, and he really wanted the boy to become a Genin, but Lucia would be immediately suspicious of his intentions if he approached them. She wouldn't understand why he was so interested. Even though his intentions were pure, she would assume he was trying to get to her through them, and it was most important to earn her trust.

Too much attention had been spent on Lucia already anyway. The other Shinobi would learn that Sasuke had gone against the Hokage's authority and questioned her in the middle of the night. Someone would have seen it and news of that sort traveled fast. The best thing to do was to publicly discipline Sasuke for overstepping protocol and treat the matter as less significant than it was.

It wasn't like she was his only concern. Konoha was struggling to survive. They had plenty of missions, and more than enough work to manage, but all their requests of late were small, and with half the world still recovering from war debt, some people couldn't even pay for C-rank work. Meanwhile, Konoha families were getting larger. He couldn't focus on Lucia.

If the Hokage personally started taking too much interest in the woman *or* her kids, the other Shinobi would wonder why. He didn't want more ninja questioning Lucia. He didn't want them questioning her children. As far as anyone knew, she was just a lost lover of a

dead Shinobi. Her only offense was being an outsider. Her kids were just Academy students. Beyond the people who *had* to know more, he wanted to keep it that way, at least for now.

Itachi was a wreck.

The days passed faster than he could imagine. They had started out at a crawl, but as the Academy Test drew nearer, they began to fly.

Iruka had been right about being way behind. The academic work was doable—deciphering code, learning signs and seals, stuff like that, but everything else was more learn-by-doing, and he hadn't nearly the same amount of practice time. He felt like a fool.

The first time he threw a kunai, it didn't even make it to the target. He stared, catatonic with shock, while every kid in the class burst out laughing. The worst part was he *couldn't* stop. He had to practice. He had to prove he was worth something. The urgency he felt in that respect wouldn't let him stop.

Day after day, he kept throwing kunai, shakier with every toss, while the kids watched and laughed until it no longer amused them. Itachi's arms hurt so bad after the first few day he could barely throw at all.

Taijutsu was worse. *Every* muscle ached from running laps, climbing trees, throwing, kicking, punching and dodging. He had bruises too, lots of them, from all the times he fell, or was hit, from not being strong or nimble enough. It didn't help that some of the other students seemed to enjoy hitting him.

The unfortunate thing was that he wasn't even out of shape. Itachi had been very active before coming to Konoha, but the exercises in Ninja Academy tested muscles he didn't even know he had.

He was exhausted. He was hurting. He felt like he'd been both for days on end. He couldn't even remember what it felt like not to be in

pain. But he knew his muscles would toughen if he kept working. He had to catch up. He had to get ahead. He had to be great.

He was reminded why every time he came home.

His mother was acting strangely. After that first morning following Sasuke's visit to their home, she resumed taking care of him and Rina, but she was almost robotic about it. Every time he looked at her, he felt a yawning urgency not to bother her. He hid from her how poorly he was doing, and was relieved that she didn't ask him questions. While stretching out his muscles, he watched her move like a ghost through the house. Sasuke never came back to visit them.

Despite her preoccupation, and not knowing how much he was struggling, his mother didn't forget their bargain. He got to go to ninja school, but she still wanted him to learn finance. Every night after dinner, she sat with him at the table and helped him work through a chapter in his accounting book.

In some ways, these were the best moments of Itachi's day. He was with his family—Rina did her homework at the table too—and numbers made sense to him, so the work was actually easy. He enjoyed scratching sums out with a pencil. His mother nodded over his progress, checked his answers, and made him correct his mistakes. It would have been even more pleasant if she wasn't so distant. She stared out the window a lot while he worked, her chin in her palm and her mind faraway. One night, when she did look at him, it almost seemed to Itachi that she was thinking of someone else: his father, he thought.

He didn't dare bring that up.

He focused on his studies.

He amazed a couple kids in his class with daring—hopefully Amaya among them—when Konohamaru took the class into the woods to climb trees, scale down cliff sides, and walk across a raging river by

balancing on a log. That kind of stuff was actually similar to what he used to do back home all the time. He walked fearlessly across the river log on his first try.

He also enjoyed himself when the whole class split into two teams and played games in the woods. Strategy was fun, and the games ninja children played were familiar to Itachi, though they were far more intense than what his friends had played back home. His favorite took all afternoon and involved trying to get the other team to fall into a trap. Building the trap was what took so long. The game itself was over in a blink.

In playing these games, Itachi realized he was beginning to at least think like a ninja.

Yukio was the best in his class, and although Itachi didn't like the kid, he watched him to learn. Amaya was right: Yukio was faster, stronger, shrewder and more skilled than the other kids, and although he was cocky, he wasn't a bad teammate as long as he got to be leader. Even though he didn't like Yukio, watching him made Itachi want to work even harder.

So he trained and studied and meditated on chakra molding until he fell asleep-often still in his clothes (all borrowed hand-me-downs from a school bin) and woke up each morning groaning. The pain started to feel good after awhile. It was the good kind—sore muscles and the sorts of bruises that warned him to be more careful. He gradually started to notice a difference in his strength and endurance. He could workout longer, run faster, and take hits easier. He had better balance.

Then one day, while throwing knives at targets tacked to hay barrels, he actually hit the bull's-eye. The knife sunk into a paper circle pinned to the hay, almost dead center. Itachi stared at it almost without comprehension. Then he tossed a second knife. The second knife sunk in next to the first.

He whipped his head to look at Haro, who was coincidentally tossing knives beside him today. "Did you see that?" he asked.

Haro nodded, scowled, and didn't say anything.

Itachi fingered the remaining kunai on his belt, lifting it carefully in his grip and balancing it on his fingers. He thought he remembered what he had done. He tossed, and the knife cut through the air smoothly, thudding into the target, but off center. Even so, it felt different. Rather than throwing and hoping, he could almost assess what he had done wrong, which meant next throw he might do it right. Tingles ran up his arm.

"I think I'm starting to get it," he said breathily. He looked again at Haro. "Do you ever think of these targets as people?"

He wasn't sure where the question had come from. It wasn't like he didn't *know* what all this was for. He understood when he told Iruka he wanted to join the Academy, but he hadn't really given it much thought beyond the hope that he would be able to protect his family. It had been over a week. How long would it take Gehard to find them? But now, all of a sudden, looking at those knives, it occurred to him what he was really learning.

Haro cast him a disdainful look. "What Shinobi use kunai or shuriken to *kill* ?"

Itachi opened his mouth to ask what they used them for if not for killing, but Haro stopped him with a hot-eyed grimace. "Don't *talk* to me, please. I'm trying to concentrate."

Sighing, Itachi shut his mouth. Haro never talked to him. Most of the kids didn't. Itachi was never even referred to by name. He was always "that kid" or the "the outsider" in conversations.

Itachi retrieved the knives and shuriken in silence. He looked at them carefully for the first time, running his fingers over the sharp ends of the shuriken, noting that the points were roughly half an inch long.

He supposed they weren't shaped very well for killing. In fact, given how limitedly the blades could penetrate, they seemed to be a weapon designed *not* to kill.

Amaya told him later that kunai knives and shuriken were used for all kinds of things, but were designed as tools for blocking, distraction or deceit. Most commonly, Shinobi threw kunai knives and shuriken to draw attention away from jutsu.

Jutsu were what Itachi really needed to pass the Academy Test. Konohamaru was willing to instruct him if he stayed behind, so he asked for help every day. He remained while the other students streamed from the room in excited clusters, chattering about the countdown to exams and how they couldn't wait to be Genin. Some of them—Yukio's fanclub—tossed smug looks at him over their shoulders. Itachi ignored them and waited at his desk until he and Konohamaru were alone in the room.

"Back again?" Konohamru asked him.

"I really want to pass the Academy exam."

Itachi knew he must look pathetic. He was the only kid to ask for help. He sat alone among the rises, slumped forward across his own desk, feeling almost woozy from exhaustion but more determined than he was tired. He still had some chakra left. As long as that lasted, he had to hold out.

"You're doing really well," Konohamaru encouraged him. "You're really improving."

Itachi sighed expressively.

"I'm not the only one who thinks so," his teacher added. "I know it must not seem like it, but in only a week you've learned a lot. You have really good balance, you pick up skills quickly, and you have a sharp mind and a good attitude. That's a lot right there."

"I need to be able to do jutsu to pass the test," Itachi said. He was pleased to hear all the things he was doing right, but if it wasn't enough, it wasn't enough; his teacher's good opinion of his character wasn't going to magically make him able to do a decent jutsu. That was one of the first lessons at his prep school. If you couldn't do the work, you couldn't take the next class. "I don't want to be here another year."

Konohamaru crossed his arms and leaned against the desk. "Your transformations are actually getting passable," his teacher told him. "They're not as good as *mine* ," he added, grinning broadly, "but they'll get you through the Academy Test. Do you want to work on clones?"

Itachi nodded.

"Okay. Remember that you're at a bit of a disadvantage," Konohamaru told him. "You have decent chakra control, but less experience than most, and you don't have as much chakra as some of the other kids. That means you can't waste any of it. If you don't give just the right amount, you are going to struggle."

Itachi pressed his fingers against his eyes, which felt hot. At least it was partly just the way he was born. "Can I increase my chakra?"

"Sure, with experience and training, but not in a few days. That takes years."

Itachi nodded. Years? He didn't have years. He would just have to control his chakra perfectly.

"Let's practice a couple of times," Konohamaru suggested, "but I don't want you to overdo it. Resting is important too."

Itachi practiced making clones for Konohamaru to evaluate until his chakra ran too low. At that point, he was so exhausted he could barely keep his eyes open anyway.

Rina was a sport about his staying late. She brought her books with her and read outside the building every day until he hobbled out. She got up when she saw him and asked how it was going. He told her it was going all right, even though it wasn't.

He wondered what everyone in the village thought. He knew they were watching the son of Itachi Uchiha, but what did they see? Were they wondering whether he would grow into a failure, a genius, or perhaps even a murderer? None of them really seemed to see *him* at all. His uncle couldn't stand the sight of him. His mother saw her son most of the time, but sometimes, when she wore that pensive expression, she looked at him as if he was the saddest thing she had ever laid eyes on. The other kids in his class saw either a joke like Yukio, or an outsider like Haro. Amaya was kind to him, and some of the other kids were nice enough, but it wasn't quite like having friends.

What bothered Itachi was that he couldn't shake the feeling that he *was* his father's son, whether he wanted to be or not, whether he had known the man or not, and that there were certain expectations because of it. He had never met Itachi Uchiha, never seen pictures of him, never even heard stories about him, but they shared the same genetics. That wasn't something he could escape. It made him want to know what his real father had been like; all he knew was that the Shinobi Itachi Uchiha had murdered his family.

There had to be more to the man than that. At least, he wanted to believe so. What had his mother *liked* about his father? Surely there was something. Despite what everyone said about her, even the stuff that was true, Itachi knew his mother. She had some colossal faults, but she was discerning. If his father had been a worthless man or a truly horrible person, he couldn't help thinking that she wouldn't have wasted her time. He felt dead certain that if she had not *liked* Itachi Uchiha, at least in some margin, Rina, at least, would not exist.

He understood that there was no excuse for what his father had done. What he hoped was that there were human reasons for doing it, and things about his father that were good, buried things maybe,

forgotten things, but good things all the same. Perhaps his mother had seen them. Maybe *those* were the things he had inherited. If so, he would prove it, not just to Sasuke, but to everyone.

It was important, not just to him, but because he didn't want his mother to suffer when she looked at him anymore. He didn't want his uncle Sasuke to suffer either. He couldn't stop thinking it was somehow his fault.

First things first: he had to pass the Academy Exam.

As test day drew nearer, Konohamaru became busy with questions from all the students. Not wanting to be a bother, and feeling like he had gotten all the tips he was going to get anyway, Itachi kept practicing on his own, sometimes late into the night. He felt pretty confident about transformations and substitutions, but clones were another matter. His clones looked pathetic—almost ghostly. He knew they would be on the test, especially if Naruto was judging it, and some of the kids in his class could manage half a dozen or more that were all perfect replicas.

On the last day before the exam, Itachi was so anxious his insides were shaking. He could barely get out of bed. After school, he went to pick Rina up from her class.

She frowned when she saw him. "Are you okay?" she said.

"I'm just tired," he told her.

"You look it," she observed. "Is your test tomorrow?"

Itachi nodded.

"Does mom know?"

"I'm not sure," he said.

He had taken to avoiding his mother. In the back of his mind, he thought how great it would be if he could keep the test a secret and

then surprise her when he became a Genin. That would be such wonderful news she would have to smile, and if he could get her to smile, maybe the dark clouds would go away. But if he failed, he wouldn't have to explain it to her, because she wouldn't even know there had been a test.

"Don't tell her, okay?" he begged Rina.

Rina took a deep breath and held it, staring straight ahead with unblinking eyes as she walked. She always acted like that, but she always took his side in the end. She wouldn't lie to their mother, but as long as no one asked her direct questions, she was brilliant at keeping secrets. After a few deliberating seconds, she exhaled and bobbed her head in a nod. "Okay."

When they reached the house, Itachi carefully opened and shut the door.

"Let's go to your room," he suggested. "I think I have enough energy to do at least one more clone jutsu. You'll help me, won't you? I want to see if you can tell which is the real me."

They closeted themselves in her room. Rina sat on her bed with her feet tucked beneath her and her back to the wall, watching him as he rubbed the aches in his legs, shook out his hands, and calmed himself, remembering that spiritual energy was important for achieving the balance required to manipulate chakra. He closed his eyes and took deep, steadying breaths.

"Okay," he said, stopping when he felt he had it. "I want you to close your eyes. Don't peek. I'm going to make a clone and I want to see if you can tell which is the real me."

Rina obediently closed her eyes. Itachi took a deep breath and formed the tiger sign. He gathered his chakra slowly and deliberately, spaced it evenly so as to get all the finer points right, and released it all in a rush.

His clone appeared beside him, looking like a pale version of himself, but fully formed, at least. Taking a deep breath, he and his clone nodded to each other. They relocated to different places in the room—the real Itachi leaning against the door and the clone Itachi leaning against the closet. He nodded at his other self and they both spoke at once.

"Okay, Rina. Open your eyes."

Rina opened them. She looked first at his clone and then at him, her expression still as she thought, but she didn't hesitate long before pointing at the real him.

Itachi let the clone vanish. "Damn," he muttered. If an Academy child of Rina's experience could tell, what hope did he have of impressing the panel of judges? "I guess there isn't much more I can do is there?"

Rina shrugged and smiled at him. He had the feeling that she was trying to put him at ease, acting like it was no big deal. She would idolize him no matter what, but what if they ended up in the same class together? He suppressed a grimace.

"I'm going to try again," he told her, and made the tiger sign.

"Itachi! Rina!"

It was their mother calling them down to dinner. Itachi shared a look with his sister. After dinner, it would be math, and then bed, unless he didn't want to have any chakra at all to work with tomorrow. Palms feeling clammy, Itachi led the way downstairs. He didn't eat much. He wasn't hungry. He mostly sat in silence, rubbing his sore muscles, while his mother stared—again—out the window.

Tomorrow, he thought. Tomorrow he would do his best. That was all he could do.

The morning came in a jolt. Rina had jumped on his bed like a cat. She clawed at him like a cat too, shaking his shoulders until his eyes flew open and he almost tossed her onto the floor.

"Itachi, *wake up* !"

"Wha…?" he began, and coughed. He had slept in his clothes. He opened his eyes painfully, and then realized how bright it was in his room. The window blinds were open. Sunlight poured through the glass. It was late. It was passed late! "Oh my God!"

"You didn't wake me and mom didn't wake me!" Rina gasped. "It's almost ten!"

He jumped out of bed, flinging his blankets aside, and almost collapsed when his feet hit the floor. He was shaking. Almost *ten* ? Students were slotted for the exam by groups and he wasn't in the first one. He might still make it!

Rina frantically followed him out of his bedroom and down the stairs. She was still in her night dress, her hair a mess, bare feet pounding down the stairs. "Itachi!" she called. "Wait for me!"

"I can't, Rina. I gotta run!"

He left her at the front door. She would probably wake mom, and then his mother would demand to know why he hadn't waited for her, which would mean she would learn about his exam, but he couldn't help that. It would take Rina too long to get ready and he couldn't afford to waste a second.

He raced through town, dodging buildings and weaving between people, ignoring startled looks and shouts to slow down. He ran all the way to the Academy, panting at every step, his legs feeling like water.

He reached the front doors just in time to see Yukio leaving the building with Michiko and another boy from his class. All three of

them wore shiny new Genin headbands. Itachi slowed to a stop in front of them.

"Too late," Yukio said. "Exam's over. We thought you must have quit."

Itachi's heart almost stopped.

"Shut up, Yukio," Michiko said, and flipped her red hair. She was the shortest girl in their class, with the longest hair and the most vibrant personality. She giggled a lot, and wore lipstick and bright skirts and long striped socks, but she was nice. "They're waiting for you," she told him. "You'd better hurry, though. Some really do think you gave up, but the Hokage wanted to wait longer."

"Thanks," he said, and booked past them.

He was trembling from head to toe when he arrived at the exam room, but there was no time for nerves. He knocked on the door.

"Come in."

He entered. The exam room was a simple rectangle shape with a carpeted floor and a long desk in the back of the room where five examiners sat in a line. Konohamaru occupied the end spot, Iruka Umino the other end spot, and the Hokage sat in the center. The other two examiners on Naruto's left and right were Jounin Itachi didn't recognize. They were both older men who looked like they had done this many times before. Konohamaru's grade book was on the table too. His lousy scores would be recorded in that, along with the bit of progress he made.

The examiners all turned to look at him as one, surprise on every face but Naruto's. The Hokage smiled at him.

"Everything okay?" Konohamaru asked. "We weren't sure you were going to make it."

The adrenaline rushing through Itachi's veins made him jittery. "I'm sorry," he said, walking away from the door and toward the center of the room. "I just didn't wake up. I really want to be here, though."

He didn't know if that was the right thing to say. Maybe it was better not to make excuses, but at least it was the truth. He swallowed, feeling a headache coming on, and wished he had a glass of water or something.

"All right. Let's get started," one of the older Jounin said.

They asked him a series of questions about his experience in Academy, his feelings on his level, the rank of Genin, and situational questions about chakra and the other skills he was learning. At the end, they asked him why he wanted to be a Shinobi.

"To protect my family," he answered immediately, and flushed. "I mean, I understand the village comes first and that there are missions to complete, but I…"

"That's a fine answer," the older examiner interrupted, waving a hand negligently. "Everyone has a different reason. We just like to ask."

Itachi nodded and fell silent.

"Now," the examiner said, looking over his grades. "You realize that your situation is a bit different than your classmates?"

"Yes," Itachi answered.

"We don't have much to judge your progress by given that you've only been here a few weeks. This is how you fare now."

The examiner flashed him the report card. Itachi's heart almost dropped out of his chest. It was a semester ranking report, showing how he fared in competition with his classmates in taijutsu, ninjutsu, individual, team, and senjutsu. He was last spot in all categories. Of

course, he couldn't hope to think his numbers in two weeks would add up to what everyone else had been accumulating all year.

"But," the examiner continued. "We recognize this isn't an accurate measurement of your ability. Konohamaru has watched you closely and has said a number of good things about what you've learned, so we'd like to judge you more on your chakra control. If you have achieved good physical and mental control, it will show in your jutsu. Can we see you do a transformation jutsu? Can you turn into Konohamaru?"

Konohamaru nodded encouragingly and smiled at him. Itachi closed his eyes. He took his time concentrating. There was no time limit. He would be judged on accuracy. He formed the tiger sign, breathed a couple of times in rhythm with his heart beat, and performed the jutsu.

When he opened his eyes, the examiners all scribbled something on the notebooks in front of them. They didn't comment.

"Can we see a clone?"

Taking a deep breath, Itachi nodded. He let the henge no jutsu fade away and gathered his chakra for a clone jutsu. He tried not to think about anything else. He pushed down his practice session with Rina yesterday. He ignored his mother's unhappiness. He tried not to think about his uncle Sasuke, the Hokage's expectations, Gehard, or anything at all but his focus in this moment. He had to replicate himself, so he thought about himself.

I really want this.

He formed the tiger sign. Taking deep breaths, he closed his eyes, felt the energy gathering inside of him, and expelled it as perfectly as he knew how. His clone appeared beside him, looking as uncertain as he felt, but physically a whole lot worse.

His clone was even more ghostly than it had been the day before. It had a washed out, pale and unsteady visage. It looked like it was going to vaporize any second. Itachi swallowed. Standing in front of the panel, Itachi's face was so hot he felt sure it must be flaming red. Had he failed? Would they send him back to Academy?

The judges looked at one another and compared notes they had written down, whispering into one another's ears as Itachi stood there shaking. The Hokage flicked a smile at him, but Itachi wasn't sure how to read it. He liked Naruto; the Hokage seemed friendly and encouraging, but that didn't mean Itachi had passed. Friendly people sometimes smiled when news was bad, and someone of the Hokage's stature couldn't show a particular student any favoritism, so he couldn't expect a smile to mean anything.

"Okay," Iruka said at the end of the table. He set down his pencil and flicked a gaze to the others. He was met with nods. Everyone laid their pencils to rest. The scores had been tallied. "Come to class Monday for your Genin team assignment."

At first, Itachi didn't think he had heard correctly. "What?"

He looked at his clone. His clone looked back, a wraith-like version of his usual self reflecting his astonishment. They let him pass with *that* ? Itachi couldn't believe it. The clone vanished as he turned back to the panel.

"You pass," the older examiner repeated. "We're quite impressed actually. You're doing amazingly well for so short a time here. I can't say I'm that surprised myself. Itachi Uchiha also passed with little time spent at Academy. It would be a shame to hold you back. You will learn even faster as a Genin."

From the end of the table, Konohamaru beamed at him. Itachi still felt as if he was being tricked, but his attention was drawn to the center of the table as the Hokage lifted a headband from a box full of headbands sitting on the floor by his chair.

It was the same headband Yukio wore on his way out of the school: Konoha's forehead protector. Itachi's lips parted. It was new; Konoha's symbol of the leaf was edged perfectly into an unscratched, shiny metal head plate, and the band was richly colored blue. The Hokage set the headband on the table and beckoned Itachi forward with a smile.

Itachi's hands shook, but he walked forward and stopped in front of the Hokage. Before Naruto's blue-eyed gaze and a wide-toothed grin it was hard to feel nervous. Trying to appear more confident, he took the headband from the Hokage's hands and paused long enough to tie it around his forehead.

"You earned it," Naruto said.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You're not going easy on me?"

"Perfectly sure," Naruto replied. "This is dangerous work. It requires competency. Iruka failed me when I couldn't do the clone jutsu. I failed multiple times."

Naruto failed at the clone jutsu? Itachi gaped. He didn't understand how his clone had passed inspection, but he accepted it had if the Hokage thought it competent.

"Will you tell Sasuke?" Itachi blurted.

The examiners exchanged looks.

The Hokage nodded. "Yes, I will."

"Thank you," he said.

"Come to my office tomorrow for your Genin picture," the Hokage added. "We'll put together your profile and assign teams over the weekend. Your life as a Genin starts Monday. Congratulations."

Itachi nodded. "Thank you," he said again, feeling fluttery, almost euphoric, as he walked quietly out of the room.

Rina was waiting for him in the hallway with his mother. She was dressed and watching the door open with bug-eyes until she saw his face. Itachi's sister flew at him as he shut the door, her face an open book of urgency and excitement. "Did you pass? Did you pass? Did you pass?"

"Yeah," he said, and tapped the forehead protector as he smiled down at her. "I-."

"Rina, step back from your brother."

Rina stepped out of the way at the sound of their mother's voice. Itachi looked up, chagrin creeping into the surreal feeling that made it seem as if he were floating through a haze.

Itachi's mother strode across the tiled hallway, hair clinging around her neck and shoulders in dark, uncombed curls. She had barely taken any time at all to dress. He was not used to seeing her when she wasn't made up. Her expression was intent on his face and hard as a rock. The sad, preoccupied look she had worn like a mask for over a week was gone completely. He quailed at the ferocity behind it.

Itachi stepped unconsciously backward, but not enough to escape. With a swiftness he might have expected from a ninja, his mother yanked the forehead protector down from his head. Confusion and anger welled up from his gut.

"I thought you wanted me to do this!" he protested, and swayed on his feet, biting back a second rude retort. It was an effort not to shout at her, or cry, or both. His mother pressed her lips together in a grimace. She shushed him with a look.

The back of her hand replaced the forehead protector, which hung loosely now around his neck. She held it there for only a few seconds.

"I thought so. You are burning up," she said concernedly. "Can you walk home?"

He stared at her. He didn't know what to say. He was burning up? He felt hot, but he'd been feeling hot for days and besides, he was emotional. He was cold everywhere else. He was thirsty too, dreadfully thirsty. It never occurred to him he might have a fever. "Yeah," he said, a little uncertain what had just happened.

His mother eyed him as they walked, hovering inches from his side, her hand hovering behind his shoulders, as if expecting he might fall over any second. For his part, Itachi was too busy reassessing the last few days to give her any mind. His thoughts swam—his exhaustion, the feelings of stress and anxiety, the sore muscles, the thirst, the hot eyes… It all took on a new meaning. Even those sickly looking clones…

"Rina," he whispered. His sister followed on his other side. "Yesterday, when I asked you which one was me, how could you tell? Did the clone look funny to you?"

She shook her head. "No. It *looked* just like you," she said. "I could tell you were the real one because the real you has weight, and you were leaning against the door. We learned in class that clones do not have substance. They aren't shadow clones, right?"

He stared at her. He hadn't asked her about what she was learning in Ninja Academy at all.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asked him anxiously. "You look awfully pale."

"I guess I'm sick," he said. That was it. His clones looked sick because *he* was sick.

He licked his lips, noticed they were cracked, noticed how parched his throat felt. He shivered as he walked, but his head felt stuffed with hot coals. The aches in his muscles that he mistook for

soreness still felt watery, but he wasn't late for anything now. When they reached home, he hobbled to the door and waited while his mother opened it and ushered him in.

"Straight to bed," she ordered. "Rina, fetch a glass of juice for your brother."

Rina nodded and darted away. His mother shut followed him upstairs and barely gave him time to change.

"Get in bed," she said through the door in a tone that brooked no argument.

He got into bed. His mother walked in and settled on the mattress beside him. She brushed the bangs back from his forehead and felt for his temperature. She looked at him, and he could see such tenderness in her face that he knew her concern was all for him—her son—and nothing else. All at once, Itachi felt glad.

"I'm sorry," she said simply. It seemed to encompass everything.

Her hand felt so cool on his forehead. "I'm sorry too."

"Why didn't you tell me you were being tested?"

"I didn't want you to worry about me."

His mother was quiet for a moment. In the interlude, Rina ran up the stairs. She opened the door, a tall glass of juice in one hand. She handed it to their mother. "Is he okay?" she asked anxiously.

"I'm guessing a temperature of 102, but he'll be all right. He needs rest."

Rina nodded and darted back out of the room.

"Drink," his mother told him. "All of it."

Itachi sat up to drink. It was hard at first. His throat felt so dry, but the more he drank, the better he felt. When the glass was empty, he lay back against the pillow with a sigh. His mother pulled the covers up around his shoulders.

"It is my job to worry about you," she told him. He looked into her eyes and saw how serious she was. "I haven't done a good job, and I know it. I should have seen that you were getting sick. I have been dealing with my own troubles, but my problems are *not* your problems. Do you understand?"

"Mom," he whispered. "If I can help…"

"You can help me by taking care of yourself and your sister. I will be fine. I mean it."

He nodded, and his mother leaned forward and planted a kiss on his forehead. He closed his eyes. The bed covers she had heaped on top of him were warming him now; at least, he was no longer shivering. His face still felt like an oven, but his mother's kiss was cool and soft. When she straightened, she touched the Konoha protector that was still tied around his neck.

"Don't take it off," he pleaded sleepily, opening his eyes a little. "I want to wear it."

"I know," she said. "I want you to. I am very proud of you."

When she said it like that, his heart felt like it was going to burst.

"I have always been proud of you," she said, "but especially today." She rose from the mattress and closed his curtains, shutting out the light of day. The room darkened, but still seemed to glow with a dim light. "I want you to sleep," she told him. "I am going to send Rina to the Akimichis for medicine. Call if you need anything. I will be right here."

As she moved away from the bed, he turned his head on the pillow to watch her go. "Mom," he called out when her hand was on the door. He wanted to tell her, in case tomorrow he felt too old to say it, being a Genin and all.

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

She turned to look at him. In the dim light of the shuttered room, her face was warm and soft and full of feeling. When she smiled, the clouds broke. "I love you more."

TBC

A/N:

Thanks again to reviewers last chapter! Higora, ngeo, Satoshii, 4theloveofholy (flame coat!), Candelabra/BKK (YAY), Joey's-Mine, StellarAbyss, bunnyluv, Melodi Moon (so glad!), pinklove, Niana Kuoji, Persephoniii (always a pleasure), Araine (thank you!), jessa (brilliant review), xzotic (thanks!), Kim Ahn, Mari, Katako-Chan, Dark Inu Fan, Susana, perfidiouspink, KnightWolfe.

Everyone reading, feedback is appreciated! ^_^

Questions for readers:

Did you enjoy it? Like it? Was it exciting, boring…? (I hope you don't hate it…)

Did you enjoy any particular section more/less for any particular reason? (there are four overall)

What are your feelings about the characters (nothing particular I'm looking for; I expect there to be an array of opinion and I don't expect all of the opinion to be positive!—it's not designed that way): Lucia,

Itachi Uchiha, Itachi junior, Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, Hinata, etc
(Rina isn't in this chapter a lot, but there will be more about her later)

Any ideas about Itachi's progress? Future happenings?

All comments welcome! Critiques also welcomed, but of course the stuff you liked is preferred (and helpful)!

Chapter 8

Author's Notes: Sorry for the gap in updates! My job moved so had to also. Moving is a lot of work…

Thank you to everyone! I've had a surge in traffic, and despite the occasional flame (why do those hurt so much?), more feedback as well, some from new people! Thank you all! It helps me improve. A big thank you to: **IVIaedhros, AnoS, xXUchihaSakura-chanXx, ShadowHeart251, DualHunters, Satoshii, CanuckAngel01, insaneteacup, Araine, aja342, Helena, Aishuu, Melodi Moon, Niana Kuonji, Fire Lady Aya, Suddon** (particularly! thanks!), **DreamWriter23, Dark Inu Fan, Rin-elwin, pink strawberries, Evanescent Luminaire, Persephoniii, Regin, chena pan, Ruby Rita, ngeo, 4thloveofholy**

Usual Disclaimer: The world and characters of Naruto don't belong to me. As usual, I apologize in advance for knowing I won't make everyone happy with all story choices and character interpretations. I find Naruto easy to understand and very difficult to write without giving too much away. By the end, I think it will make sense though!

White Rain

Chapter 8

By Zapenstap

When Itachi came to the Hokage's office for his photo and Genin ID, Naruto watched him closely. The boy sat down in the wooden chair and held unnaturally still for his picture.

"Feeling okay?" Naruto asked. He hadn't realized Itachi was sick until Lucia sent word. He wasn't sure why he hadn't noticed. It was kind of obvious. "We can take your photo another day."

"Thanks, but I'm all right," the boy replied. "This doesn't take much energy."

Once the picture was taken, Naruto looked at Itachi again. He was reminded starkly how different he was from the Genin Naruto had been. They were about the same age, but Naruto had been a boisterous jokester, rebellious on the outside, insecure on the inside, and itching for confrontation so he could prove himself. Itachi was controlled, communicative, and unfailingly polite. According to Konohamaru, he avoided confrontation. He always did his best, but he tried not to bother anyone. It was a funny trait for a ninja, but then again, Naruto had been a funny ninja too.

Naruto pulled up a chair and sat down across from him.

"I want to talk to you a bit," he said.

Itachi looked up. There was apprehension on his face, but he was listening. His hand drifted up to his forehead protector. "You aren't going to take it away, are you?"

Naruto smiled. "No. You earned that."

Itachi relaxed.

Naruto had been looking forward to talking to all the students who became Genin, but this student particularly. He could tell the boy was nervous about being a Genin. Naruto supposed he had reason to be.

All the Genin had secret fears, but Itachi was different from the others—an outsider. He wasn't the first person born outside the village to graduate from the Academy, but the occurrence was rare, and outsiders weren't always trusted.

Fortunately, Itachi was showing merit. His chakra control wasn't perfect, but most Genin didn't have perfect chakra control. Konohamaru said the boy was something of a perfectionist, and that

he was hard on himself when he performed beneath the level of his classmates. In academic matters, he was exemplary; he had impeccable handwriting, an impressive memory, and was dead accurate with summations and reasoning. Physically, he was daring and strong and would try anything, but he had a lot to learn.

His real problem was that he didn't have a single impressive jutsu, nothing beyond basic Academy level training, which wasn't much. Even Naruto had had shadow clones. Itachi had no skills that set him apart from the ranks, and no one at home to teach him. Still, given his experience, he had done amazingly well. It would not be a shock to Naruto if, given a little time, the boy turned out to be gifted.

But it wasn't his intention to overwhelm him with expectations of that sort.

"I wanted to ask how you are feeling," Naruto told him.

"Oh, I'm getting better," Itachi answered. "I've slept a lot. My fever is gone."

"Ah. Hmm. That's not what I meant. I meant, how do you feel about —all of this? It's been a couple of weeks now. How are you coping?"

Confusion fleeted across Itachi's face. He wasn't used to being asked this question. Naruto was prepared to wait him out. He was practiced at conversations like this one, not just with Genin, but with all the Shinobi in the village.

Shinobi weren't used to processing how they felt about much of anything. With each generation it had dropped from a secondary consideration to a non-consideration until the concept melted away into obscurity.

Changing that was an effort. The old ways were deeply worn. Forging a new path took extraordinary resilience. Fortunately, Naruto was a popular Hokage, not only because of his strength, but because of his determination and influence. He had proved his way

worked. But he had his flaws too, and he had to be mindful (others were constantly reminding him) that he was the leader of a generation that had been taught a different way.

The older generations were the ones who most often misunderstood Naruto's intentions. Some of them thought he was out to make Shinobi weaker or softer, that he meant to unman them or force them to be something that had no place in the kind of work Shinobi performed.

In fact, Naruto wanted to make them stronger. He had seen Shinobi tear themselves apart, or tear others apart, in an effort to suppress desires that did not need to be suppressed, or to keep secrets that should have been shared. So much had been wasted.

Strength was important. Control was important. Discretion was important. But in the end, it all boiled down to choices, and choices had to come from the heart or they were meaningless. Many Shinobi lived believing they didn't have choices. They did as they were told, accepted a fee as payment; some had little understanding otherwise of what mattered or why. Naruto was trying to show them that strong hearts were the foundation of all strength. He was asking them to think in a new way, to believe in themselves in a new way, and that degree of change—even if it was ultimately good—was frightening to them, from the oldest Jounin to the youngest Genin.

Itachi was not a Shinobi, not yet, but some of the same tactics applied. Itachi wasn't always forthcoming in voicing how he really felt, but like his mother, he had little difficulty communicating when he had a mind to, so Naruto suspected it was learned behavior. He wondered if Lucia kept as many secrets from her children as she did everyone else, and whether or not her children had been asked to do the same or learned it from example. He still wasn't sure.

"I'm okay," Itachi said. "Mostly." He swallowed and shifted uncomfortably, but when he looked back into Naruto's face, he seemed to find himself. Naruto was told he often had that effect on

people. Some said it was the cornerstone of his success. "I have some questions."

"About?"

"Who I am."

Naruto smiled at him. "Only you can answer that question. Who do you want to be?"

Itachi looked down and to the right, thinking. It was startling to Naruto how much he looked like an Uchiha, almost exactly like Itachi Uchiha in fact, when he was pensive.

"It's about my father," he said, looking up at Naruto with shining black Uchiha eyes, "and my mother."

Naruto nodded. He had questions about that too.

"I'm not sure I know how to say this," Itachi said. "It feels wrong somehow, but—" He paused, swallowing. "Gehard never felt like my father."

Naruto blinked. He had thought Itachi was troubled by his biological father, but he supposed it wasn't outlandish for his confusion to be deeper than that. He crossed his arms and just listened.

"I think he knew," Itachi continued. "I think he always knew—that I wasn't his, I mean. He sort of resented me, and he let me know it, but then Rina was born and I think…" The boy looked uncomfortable. "Well, I think he loved her. But he never loved me. He just tolerated me because of my mother. I sort of always hated him for that."

Naruto didn't say anything at first. He tried to understand what that would feel like.

Itachi looked at the floor beneath his feet. "Did you tell Sasuke I made Genin?"

"Hmm? Yeah, I did. He—" Naruto stopped mid sentence. Sasuke hadn't really said anything, but he didn't want to tell Itachi that.

Itachi's face had a crushed look. "He doesn't care, does he?"

Naruto took a breath. The father who had raised him didn't love him. His real father was dead. His uncle wanted nothing to do with him. He had a mother, but something was missing, or misery wouldn't be etched into the boy's features. But it was the air of resignation that really bothered Naruto.

"Look," Naruto said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "It's not you. Sasuke just needs some time to get used to you. It's difficult for him because of the way he feels about his brother."

"He must hate me," Itachi said.

"He doesn't hate you," Naruto assured him. "I'm sure if he got to know you, he would like you. He just sees his brother in you and he doesn't want to be reminded of that right now. It's a lot for him to deal with. He'll warm up to you eventually. I'm sure he will. I know Sasuke. He's stubborn, especially about relationships, but he'll come around."

Itachi didn't look convinced, but he did relax a little. "Can you tell me what my real father was like?"

There was a strange hitch to his voice when he asked this question. Naruto staggered with the weight of the answer. What was his father like? He had wrestled with what to tell the boy. Naruto hadn't really known Itachi Uchiha while he was alive. Like everyone else, all he had known were a bunch of assumptions. What were the facts? Itachi was an Uchiha who awakened the Mangekyou Sharingan. He had obtained it by killing a friend. He used it to kill his family. He had done it to prevent a war. He had lived for years in agony, hoping only for the day Sasuke would be strong enough to kill him and bury the ugliness.

Naruto wanted to tell the child everything, but he didn't think it was the right time. How could he explain it to a boy who didn't know the Shinobi world? It was difficult enough for Naruto to understand.

"Did you know him?" the kid pressed.

"Ah. Sort of," Naruto evaded, trying to think quickly but not too quickly. "I met him a few times."

"You mean you fought him," Itachi guessed again, sudden realization dawning on his face. He was quick. "Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have asked. I was hoping you might be able to tell me something about him. I know about the killings, but I guess you can't talk about that. I just …" He trailed off.

"What?" Naruto prompted. "Is there something particular you want to know?"

"I was just thinking… Well I was hoping maybe there was something else." He flushed and looked away, unable to meet Naruto's eyes. "I want to know about what kind of person he was." When he looked up, his face was alight with hope. "I mean, my mother must have seen something. There's something good about everybody, isn't there?"

Naruto nodded. Itachi, who was named after his father, wanted to understand who he was by extension of who his parents had been. Naruto crossed his arms and leaned back, thinking. He had wondered the same things. He decided that people made themselves who they wanted to be, but even so, there were some things… He looked at the boy's anxious face. "What was he like, you ask? Itachi Uchiha, hmm. He was a reserved sort of person. Hard to know. When he was young, he was the pride of the Uchiha clan. He was one of the best Shinobi in the village."

"So Sasuke…"

Naruto hesitated, but he supposed Itachi Uchiha's son had a right to know. "Sasuke really looked up to Itachi. They were four years apart. Sasuke and Itachi were close, at least until…"

Itachi's eyes widened. Naruto could almost see his thoughts whirl. "He killed his parents. Sasuke's parents."

"Right. The whole clan," Naruto admitted. "Sasuke was the only one left alive."

The boy shivered and looked down at his hands. Naruto wondered if he had said too much. Would it be better or worse to explain that Itachi Uchiha had wanted to live a gentler life, that he was the sort of person who hated conflict, who didn't really care for fighting, but had done it anyway? Would it be better or worse to explain that Itachi Uchiha had loved Sasuke more than anyone, yet deliberately made him suffer more than anyone? Would it be better or worse to explain that Sasuke had ultimately been the one to kill his brother, this boy's father, before finding out the truth? Naruto didn't know. How complicated of emotions could an eleven year old be expected to process?

But that wasn't the biggest issue. He also had the feelings of his friend to consider. And there were the confidentiality files. Naruto leaned forward and put a hand on Itachi's shoulder. "It's complicated. And it's hard for Sasuke," Naruto told him. "That's why he avoids you. It's not anything you have done. Someday he will be glad you're here." He smiled. "When that day comes, I think he will want to be the one to tell you everything there is to know."

Itachi looked up and gave Naruto a considering look. He didn't look shaken as Naruto expected. His expression was more…calculating, as if he were thinking through a problem rather than processing emotions. Then again, why should he be emotional? The boy hadn't known Itachi Uchiha, or anyone in the Uchiha Clan.

"Will Sasuke be my Genin teacher?" Itachi asked.

Naruto smiled. "No. It would be ideal for you to learn from someone with a Sharingan, supposing you happen to have one, but Sasuke is not ready for that level of commitment."

"Who will it be then?" Itachi asked curiously.

Naruto grinned. "When you're assigned your team, you will find out! And hey, don't worry so much. If you really want it, and if you work hard for it, I think you will do fine. "

Itachi smiled a little. When he rose to leave, he looked a bit more confident. Naruto stopped him at the door.

"If you don't mind," Naruto said, "I'd like you to ask your mom to come by and see me sometime in the next day or two."

Itachi looked mildly puzzled, but he didn't hesitate in answering. "Sure."

Sakura wanted to tear her hair out.

It had been a long day, most of it paperwork, and she was sick sick sick of dealing with problems that had no solutions.

The desk in front of her was flooded, positively *flooded* , with requests for Shinobi. Work was plentiful, and that was good, but it would be better if it wasn't all stupid stuff—Genin stuff. How many times would they be forced to send Jounin out to hoe vegetables just to pay the bills? Half their clients paid late, or in minimal installments, or not at all. Even the lords were suffering because of the war. Debt debt debt. And who had to keep track of everyone who defaulted? Sakura. Oh yes. She was certainly frustrated!

To make the situation worse, another assassination request had come in. Naruto was going to flip. He was going to shout and rant and wave his arms. He was adamant about their policies, and philosophically Sakura agreed with him one hundred percent, but the

payment offering for "no questions asked" was sickeningly sweet, especially when Konoha was up to its collective eyeballs in unpaid bills. It made her stomach turn to think that she would think that—even facetiously!

It all amounted to one truth: Sakura was quite ready to retire from her administrative role. Naruto would just have to find someone else!

Sasuke was going to kill her for what she intended to do instead, but to hell with it. Let him try. She loved Sasuke hopelessly, but she was tired of being so accommodating all the time. What about what *she* wanted?

Her hands clenched into fists on the table. It didn't help that stupid Ino was always gabbing about babies babies babies! Ino was so smug about getting married first, about having children first, about having a fancy house and fine clothes and expensive jewelry and an adoring husband, and….GAH. Did *everything* between them have to be a competition?

Sakura drew a deep breath and settled her shoulders. She stared at the far wall and forced herself to relax. Of course not. This was just nerves. She refused to be upset. So Ino was happily married. So Naruto and Hinata were practically engaged. She and Tenten could still whine together, not that she and Tenten were particularly close, but it was something. They would have something to talk about, at least until Neji caved… Then Sakura would be the last one, hanging on to Sasuke's "maybe someday," but that wasn't the end of the world. All things considered, she was young and there was lots of time. She was willing to concede that it was too early for her to have a family. It was just hard when everyone in the village her age seemed to be headed for the same horizon and she alone was left behind and wondering why.

Fortunately, it occurred to her that there was something she could do—that she would be good at, in fact—that might satisfy her for the time being.

Naruto, of course, was thrilled. It was almost like he had been *waiting* for her to ask. And of course he did exactly what she thought he was going to do.

Now she just had to make Sasuke see that it was for the best. She needed his blessing or there would be hell to pay every day for the rest of their lives…or as long as they could put up with each other anyway.

Sakura froze with an envelope dangling from her fingers. That was definitely something to think about. What if Sasuke took it personally? But that was silly. Surely, he wouldn't be *that* upset… would he? She gnawed over the thought. Probably not, but maybe she shouldn't have decided so impulsively. Still, it was done now. Done was done. What next? How should she tell him?

She should wait until he was relaxed. Or better yet... Sakura bit her lip. Sasuke hadn't touched her since his fight with Naruto and that devastating talk with Lucia. He had been healing. And he was so preoccupied, but maybe…

Wine. She needed wine. Sasuke didn't really drink, but he would have a glass if she poured him one, and she felt she at least would need one. She also needed to find something to wear, maybe something lacy and silky and red. Sasuke claimed he didn't care about those kinds of things, but in the past, whenever she wore something like that, his brain had shut off. He was amendable to almost anything for a few hours. It was like his mind was on rails.

Sakura vaulted from the desk, leaving the mail right where she had left it. As she ran home, the sun was already starting to set in, washing the walls of the village houses in dark pinks and golds and purple shadows. The village streets were nearly empty. Sasuke would be training until after dark. He trained every day of late to keep his focus.

Sakura had an hour to shower, dress (sort of), cover herself in a robe, and pour wine. She was dizzy with thought about what Sasuke

would say. All she could think of was trying to make him as happy as possible before she told him. She padded around the house barefoot and tidied up until she heard the door open.

When Sasuke entered, he looked tired, and a little sad, but he looked good to her too. She counted up all his good features—it was a long list—and waited nervously as his eyes jumped to her. He noted her robe and then looked around.

"You cleaned up," he noted. "And you poured wine." There was a hint of suspicion in his tone.

Sakura swallowed and didn't say anything.

"What is this for?" he inquired, but didn't press when she didn't answer. His eyes were brighter, thought, the tiredness draining away. He was getting curious. "I'm going to take a shower." He glanced at her over his shoulder as he turned toward the bathroom. Sakura could almost feel his mind turning.

She knew she was being about as subtle as an elephant.

Sasuke emerged from the shower also in a robe. Water dripped from his hair. Sakura handed him wine and just stood there, watching as he downed the glass in a few swallows before setting it down on the mantle. In her mind, Sakura had imagined this going much differently. In her imagination she was coquettish and sultry and smooth. She eased him with casual conversation and enticed him by loading harmless phrases with suggestive and witty undertones. In reality, all she did was stand on the carpet with her heart beating a mile a minute and no words in her mouth at all. Her mind was a complete blank.

It didn't matter. As soon as Sasuke set down the wine, he was kissing her—urgently.

It felt so good. Her arm wrapped automatically around his shoulders. Her legs trembled. She was so weak where was concerned, and yet

it was a beautiful kind of weakness, one she would kill to keep. His hands parted her robe. She felt his fingers on her skin, his breath in her ear. She stopped thinking entirely.

"What's this about?" he whispered roughly against her hair, but at that point Sakura couldn't form words, only feel, and in the way she responded, they both promptly forgot.

She told him later, when they lay tangled up together in bed, all the bedding tossed in a heap on the floor. Sasuke's head rested against her chest. His eyes were closed.

"I'm going to be a teacher," she said. "Naruto has assigned me to your… to Itachi's team."

There was a profound silence. She stroked Sasuke's skin from his neck to his shoulder and waited for him to say something. When he didn't say anything, she began to fidget with the pillows and the headboard. After a little while, she was afraid he had gone to sleep and hadn't heard her.

"Sasuke," she blurted. "Do you mind?"

"Mind?" he mumbled groggily. "What?"

"My decision! Didn't you hear what I said?"

His eyes opened. He pushed himself up on his elbows and looked at her. "You don't have to ask me. And you don't have to do…this. If there's something you want to do, I won't stop you from doing it."

Was he mad at her? She couldn't tell.

"Besides, you already decided, didn't you? What is there to ask?"

She bit her lip. "How would you stop me? That's not what I care about. I love you. I want you to be happy. *That* is why I did this. Not stopping me isn't the same as not minding!"

He was quiet for a moment. "I don't mind."

"But—" she began.

He shushed her by cupping her face in his hand. His kiss made her thoughts scatter. "I don't mind," he whispered. "You'll make a good teacher. If that's what you want, it's fine."

Sakura took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She wanted to believe him. She tried to relax.

Itachi approached the entrance to the school with Rina trailing just behind him. He stopped just before the first step. Rina eyed him questioningly, but didn't say anything. He looked first at the grass under his feet and then up to the entrance of the school house.

Was this really his first day as a Genin? Itachi hadn't been attending Academy very long. It felt extraordinarily strange to leave. His class today wasn't really a class. All he would be learning was what team he was on and who his teacher would be. They would be dismissed after that.

He took a deep breath. His hands were shaking just a little. They still had a few minutes. He wasn't quite ready to go in.

He thought about his conversation with the Hokage the other day. Naruto believed in him, but maybe the Hokage only thought he would do well because he was his father's son. Itachi wasn't sure what to think about that. He had the distinct impression that there was something about his father, about Itachi Uchiha, that was really important but not readily shared. When Naruto talked about what he was like, Itachi felt that the Hokage didn't hate the man, or even think that badly of him. Itachi found that strange for a purported murderer.

At first, he rationalized that maybe it was because the Hokage was a killer too. After all, the Hokage must be a fearsome ninja, and the way ninja judged their own was probably different than the way

others judged them. But he wasn't sure how far that kind of thinking extended. Did it extend to men who killed their families—other ninja families? If that was case, he would expect the leader of a Shinobi village to reflect those kinds of values.

And he didn't. The Hokage was…nice. He seemed to genuinely care. Itachi really liked Naruto. He seemed honest and open and direct. Those were strange words to apply to a Shinobi, but Itachi was grateful. He would like to think it was possible for a ninja to be that kind of person, but if it was true, then there was something he wasn't getting.

He suspected his mother thought the Hokage's kindness was an act. He was pretty sure she believed that Naruto was playing a role to earn their trust so they would reveal more than they should. That had happened to her before, he knew, but this time, Itachi hoped she was wrong. He really wanted to believe in Naruto.

"Itachi?" Rina said. "Are we just going to stand here? I have class."

Itachi looked again at the entrance of the building. How long did he have now? Still a few minutes. "How's school going for you, Rina?"

"Good," she replied.

"Are you learning anything interesting?"

"I'm learning about code."

He was surprised. That sounded advanced for beginner level.

"I made up my own."

He smiled at her. "Was that for school?"

She sighed. "No. I just wanted to."

"Can I see it?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, I see," he said. "It's a secret."

She thought about that for a moment. He could almost see her weighing the thrill of keeping a secret all to herself against sharing one with him. "Maybe if you break the code, we can share it," she said finally.

By her tone, Rina seemed to think it was possible for him, but she was going to make him work for it. That was very Rina. He wondered how difficult that would be. "Can I try after school?"

"No. I haven't coded anything *yet* ."

"Why not?"

She stared straight ahead when she answered. "No secrets."

His minutes had trickled away. Itachi still felt weird. His former Academy classmates would be wearing the same headband that he was wearing. Every one of them would be trying to figure out who was going to be on whose team. He could almost see the flock around Yukio, pining and hoping to be in his group. Not him. He would give anything *not* to be on Yukio's team, or anyone who was just going to give him a hard time. Probably none of his classmates even knew Itachi had graduated. He wondered if they would be talking amongst themselves about whether or not he would show up today. He wondered if Amaya knew he had passed.

He took a deep breath.

"Rina, you'll have to walk home by yourself after school today," he told his sister. "You can do that, right?"

She just looked at him. To anyone else, she might have looked expressionless, but to him, her dark, glittering eyes looked bothered.

She probably resented him for abandoning her. She was trying not to let it show, but she would pout for hours if he didn't address it.

He tried not to sound sharp. "Don't sulk, okay? It's annoying and you're getting too old for it. It's only a few blocks."

"I'm not sulking!" She sounded so indignant, as if she had never sulked in her life.

"All right. Sorry," he said. "What's wrong then?"

"Can't I watch?"

"No. You're not part of my team. I doubt anyone else's sister is going to tag along. Didn't you make some friends in your own class?"

She nodded.

"Can you play with them after school today? Maybe go to one of their houses?"

"Yeah," she conceded, and sighed. "Itachi?"

"What?"

"Are you okay?"

He was startled. "You're worried about *me* ?"

"Yeah."

"I'm fine," he said.

"You seem sad."

"I'm not sad. I'm just worried about doing well. I'm nervous. I want to do a good job."

"For Sasuke, right?"

"For everyone. For you and mom too."

Rina thought that over for a minute. "I can walk home by myself."

"Thanks."

Itachi walked Rina to class and left her at the door. From inside, Tenten waved to him. He waved back and proceeded to his own classroom for the last time. The hallways were empty. Most days, students arrived early in order to have time to gossip with one another before class started. Today they would be divided permanently into squads, so this morning that would have even more to say than usual. Trying not to feel self conscious, Itachi straightened the Genin headband on his forehead and pushed open the door.

It was exactly as he had imagined it. All the students were out of their seats and talking excitedly. All of them wore shining new Genin headbands with the blue cloth strap, though not all of them chose to wear it on their heads. They all turned when he opened the door.

Yukio almost fell out of his chair when Itachi walked into the room. No one said anything directly to him, but he could feel the weight of their eyes on his headband and guessed what they were thinking:

How had he passed? What team was going to be unlucky enough to end up with him *?*

Itachi took deep breaths and swallowed a few times to work moisture into his mouth. He could do this.

They were all seated by the time Konohamaru arrived, though not in their assigned seats. After all, they were no longer Academy students. They were Genin. Konohamaru grinned at all of them, his expression full of a teacher's affection, his smile brightening his face from ear to ear.

"I'm so proud of you!" he gushed, and wiped tears from his eyes. Some of the kids giggled. Konohamaru swallowed and grinned. "Okay," he said. "You're not here to see your teachers cry. You're here to find out your teams, right?"

Everyone sat straighter.

Konohamaru was very clear on the rules: Team assignments were final. No contestations would be heard. If they couldn't work with their teams, they could quit being Genin, no exceptions. Shinobi were expected to work together. Itachi prayed fervently that he wouldn't end up with anyone who would be disappointed to have to work with him.

"Most teams are formed for balance," Konohamaru said. "Assume we know what we are doing. Each squad will be assigned a Jounin instructor. Your instructor retains the right to send any of you, your whole team, in fact, back to Academy if they don't think you are ready. Remember this: you pass or fail as a group, and if any of you fail—" He grinned. "You'll answer to me!"

There was a deafening silence throughout the room.

"Okay," Konohamaru said. "Here are the teams. Listen closely because I'm not going to repeat this. Team 1: Yukio, Michiko, Jomei."

Itachi felt as if he were collapsing from relief. He wasn't in Yukio's team! So far so good. He was pretty sure Yukio would have killed him. The next two teams came fuzzily to his ears, as if he was were listening through a thick fog. His heart was beating so hard he could scarcely think.

"Team Four: Amaya, Haro, Itachi."

His heart stopped.

He didn't hear anything else Konohamaru said. He was pretty sure that for a full minute, he was not alive. He didn't fall over. He just sat

frozen in his seat. He might as well have been a stature. He must have petrified. The whole room seemed just as silent.

Yukio snickered.

Konohamaru continued through the list. When he reached the end, he told the squads teams where they would meet their teachers and dismissed the class for a break. Team Four was supposed to return to the classroom, which was just as well since Itachi didn't think he could move even if he had somewhere else to be. There was a storm of commotion around him as his former classmates got up and pounded for the doors, screaming with excitement, dismay, incredulity, and everything in between. The room emptied of everyone except himself, Haro, Amaya, and Konohamaru.

Konohamaru lingered at the desk. His eyes were fixed on them.

"Haro?" Konohamaru said. "Do you want to say something?"

Itachi managed to turn his head just enough to see his classmate. Haro's face was flushed with anger. "You can't be serious," he croaked, reigning in a shout by sheer force of will. "He is an outsider. You. Can't. Be. Serious."

"You don't have objections, do you?" Konohamaru said.

Haro's mouth worked silently. His face was red like a pepper. The color even surged from his face down to his neck. The muscles in his arms bulged. His fingers flexed on the table. But he didn't speak. He didn't move. He merely trembled.

"Good." Konohamaru gathered up his things and walked to the door. He paused with his hand on the knob. "Your instructor will be here after the break."

Even after the door closed, Itachi couldn't think of a thing to say.

He was on a squad with Amaya and Haro.

Elation mixed dizzyingly with terror. He liked Amaya, who was mature and calm and dedicated to learning, but he had hoped to impress her in a match or something, not in a situation where she was depending on his skill—or lack thereof—to succeed. And Haro? He was pretty sure Haro was a breath or two from punching him in the face. Itachi would have preferred being with kids in the class who were more laid back, or even kids who were struggling a little. In his old school, he worked well with people who were quiet and looked to others for direction, like Jumei, who hadn't said a word in Itachi's presence since he had started school at the Academy, but Jumei ended up on Yukio's team.

As soon as the doors were shut, Haro exploded. He spoke to Amaya, but his anger was directed at Itachi.

"I knew it! I knew it! It was because you let him sit next to you. Now they think we're chums. This is the worst thing that could have happened! The absolute worst! Why did you have to be so *nice* ?"

"Calm down," Amaya said. In almost direct contrast to Haro, she had been regally composed since Konohamaru announced that she and Haro and Itachi would all be on a team together, so composed she was almost icy. "At least they didn't split us up. It's not that bad. You and I are good enough that we should be able to manage it."

"Able to manage it?" Haro roared. "Didn't you hear what Konohamaru said! If *any* of us fail, we *all* get sent back! We'll have to take care of him. Ugh! Why can't you and I just be on team alone? We've been working together longer than anyone. What can three people do that two can't?"

"You *know* it's teams of three."

"Okay, fine! They could have at least given us someone competent. But this kid? This is the worst!"

Itachi didn't know which was more unsettling: Haro's fury or Amay's absurd calm.

While he was trying to decide, Haro climbed over his desk and swung himself into Itachi's row. He crouched on top of the seat beside Itachi's, his brown eyes fierce with contempt. Itachi met his glare with what he hoped looked like confidence. The other kid's jaw was clenched tight, eyes like thunderheads beneath a flop of brown hair.

"Look," Itachi began. "I know you don't like me, but I—"

"Like you?" Haro groaned. "What does it have to do with *liking* you? Do you think it matters what a Shinobi likes? What *good* are you? What can you do? You can't do anything!"

"I passed the tests same as anybody," Itachi retorted, knowing he had to defend himself. Confrontation seemed unavoidable where Haro was concerned.

"Substitutions? Transformations?" Haro spat. "Even clones are nothing. Yours aren't even real." He turned to Amaya. "See what I mean? This is what I'm talking about. He doesn't even know."

"What?" Itachi demanded, looking back and forth from Haro and Amaya. "What don't I know?"

Amaya looked miserable.

"So maybe every team gets a dud," Haro added, still to Amaya, as if Itachi didn't exist or couldn't hear him. "But did you *see* Yukio's team? How is that balanced? How is that even *fair* ? They're practically unbeatable!"

Itachi was lost. Yukio had been paired with Michiko, the short little red head with the loud voice who always wore painfully colorful outfits, and Jumei who never spoke. Itachi hadn't noticed anything special about either of them.

"You're so proud you passed the Academy test," Haro told him, "but not everyone who passes that lame test actually becomes a Genin.

Most don't."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say," Itachi said.

Amaya bit her lip. "Itachi, most students can do *more* than what is on the Academy test. It's like Yukio said when you first got here: we all keep secrets about what we can do. Most of us have been training to be ninja since we were really small. I know I have. And Haro has."

Itachi felt like he was drowning. "And Yukio…?"

Haro scoffed. "That arrogant jerk! For a Genin, he is awesome at taijutsu and ninjutsu. His only weakness was in genjutsu, but--"

"--Michiko is a genjutsu specialist," Amaya finished for him. "She's particularly gifted. Everybody knows because last year when we were in Academy, Michiko locked the whole class in a genjutsu. Even some of the Jounin didn't know how she did it to everyone at once. They had to call Kurenai in to help dispel the effects. And Jumei… I don't even know what he can do, but his father is a medical ninja, so I'm sure he's pretty skilled."

Itachi's headband felt heavier than ever. "Why do you keep secrets from each other?" he asked.

Amaya and Haro exchanged incredulous glances. Haro could not have looked more unimpressed. Itachi tried to keep his face straight.

"Because," Amaya explained, "we'll have to fight each other. That's how you advance as a Shinobi. And a big part of winning is having tricks your opponent doesn't know about."

Itachi swallowed. Of course.

"But don't worry," Haro said scornfully. "Pressure's off! We already know *you* don't have any."

Itachi didn't think he could feel any sicker. "What if I had a Sharingan?" he asked desperately. "Would that help?"

"Yes, it probably would!" Haro spat. "Why don't you whip that out in the next few minutes so we don't all get sent back to repeat Academy another year? Do you even know what a Sharingan *does* ?"

Itachi didn't. He shook his head mutely. Haro threw up his hands.

"The Sharingan allows you to copy jutsu," Amaya told him, "It's also supposed to be able to see through ninja tricks."

That did sound useful, but before Itachi could ask any more questions, the door burst open with such a bang that the chalkboard shook.

Haro slid smoothly into one of the chairs in Itachi's row, but left two empty chairs between them. In the row behind them both, Amaya sighed.

Sakura Haruno stood in the doorway. Itachi instantly sat straighter. He remembered her from the day the Hokage fought his uncle. He hadn't seen her fight, or knew much about her beyond that she was Sasuke's girlfriend, but he remembered that she had demolished the countertop of the poor ramen merchant between one smile and the next.

She was dressed for combat. Her forehead protector bound her hair behind her ears like a headband. She wore black gloves and boots and elbow protectors. She carried shuriken and kunai knives in a belt pouch.

She shut the door with much more finesse than she opened it and took a look around the room. She smiled at the three of them in a way that made Itachi nervous. "So," she said. "Here you are. Well, come on. It's a nice day. We're going outside."

It took Itachi a moment to realize it—Sakura was their teacher.

Itachi got up from his seat, surprised that his muscles and bones all worked together well enough to make the effort possible. Trying not to look at either Amaya or Haro, he followed Sakura out of the classroom and down the hall. Amaya and Haro followed more slowly behind him. None of them spoke.

Sakura led them to the flight of stairs just outside and had them sit in a row at the top. Amaya sat between Itachi and Haro, her face still a composed mask. Haro still looked angry. Itachi was starting to get the impression that Haro was pretty much angry all the time.

Sakura put her hands on her hips when she faced them. Behind her, rows of trees stretched along either side of the path. The treetops entwined overhead, the branches forming a canopy like a tunnel. A carpet of lush green grass accentuated the vibrancy of color. It was usually a pretty sight. Itachi couldn't enjoy it.

"Okay," Sakura said. "Let's introduce ourselves. I want to know more about you."

"More about us?" Haro muttered.

"Yes, of course. I'll start. My name is Sakura Haruno. I am most well known for my medical training as I trained under the fifth Hokage Lady Tsunade. This is my first year as a Genin instructor."

Amaya and Haro exchanged glances. They were probably thinking that a first year instructor was another shot in the gut. Itachi didn't say anything. He didn't have any expectations. The weakest Shinobi in the village would be able to teach him something, and he was pretty sure Sakura wasn't weak.

Sakura pressed her lips together in a firm line. "Your turn," she said. "Tell me a bit about yourselves. I want to know about your goals. Why do you want to be Genin? More than that, what are you like? Tell me something about yourselves."

Itachi blinked. Why did he want to be a Genin? He had been asked a similar question at the exam. His answer hadn't been premeditated—he wanted to protect his mother and sister. More than that, though, or perhaps on top of that, he wanted to prove that he could do this. Now it seemed even more urgent. He felt overwhelmed at the thought of letting Amaya and Haro down.

Amaya spoke first. She sat very straight with her hands on her knees. She lifted her chin when she spoke. "I'm Amaya Satou. My father is Sachio Satou. I have been an Academy student since I was seven. I don't know what to say about hobbies. I spend most of my free time training. I want to be an elite Jounin."

Itachi blinked. He hadn't realized Amaya was so intense. She had such a sweet disposition. But he also remembered what she and Haro had said about keeping secrets. How good was she? If she was very good, it might explain a bit why Yukio always seemed to be trying to goad her. Was she better than Haro? From the way she talked about her father, he sounded like someone very well known. Sakura stood with her arms crossed as she listened, nodding as Amaya spoke. By her lack of reaction, Itachi suspected she knew something about Amaya already. She probably knew about all of them.

When Amaya seemed to be finished, Haro jumped in. "I'm Haro Akamatsu. Amaya and I have been friends and neighbors since we were little. I like going to sporting matches. I have two older sisters and two older brothers. Everyone in my family is a ninja. One of my brothers is a Chuunin. Both my parents and sisters and my other brother are in the medical core, but I like taijutsu."

"Okay," Sakura said, and looked pointedly at Itachi. He supposed it was his turn.

"My name is Itachi. I used to be Itachi Barculo, but now I go by my mother's name, which is Van Alstyne." He tried to think of something else to say.

"What do you like?" Sakura prompted.

"Um, I like numbers. I also like the guitar, but I'm better at math than music—"

"I didn't know you played guitar," Amaya said.

"I'm not really that good at it," Itachi told her. "You should hear my sister play piano."

Amaya smiled at him. He couldn't remember the last time she smiled like that, but it stole his breath. He felt impressive and stupid all at once. He realized that he was grinning at her. For a second, he forgot where he was.

"You play the *guitar* ," Haro exclaimed. "Why do we even care? What does that even matter? How does playing guitar—poorly!—help anything? You are seriously the weakest Genin I have ever seen! I swear, you are the most annoying—"

"Hey now," Sakura objected, waving her hands. "I didn't say your hobbies had to be related to your training—"

"—person other than Yukio!" Haro shouted over her. "You don't deserve to be here!"

"I do deserve it!" Itachi retorted.

Between him and Haro, Amaya bowed her head over her knees, hiding her face.

"I passed the test," Itachi continued. "And my father was a Shinobi too. I may not have been training all my life, but I don't see how being raised on food pills and shuriken makes you any better than me."

Haro looked astonished.

"Yeah, I know about food pills," Itachi said, guessing at the reason. "I can read. I read our class textbook in three days. I will catch up. I'm going to prove to you and Sasuke and everybody that I can do this! It is important that I learn this stuff. My family is important to me and there's no one else to protect them. Just me. I'm not going to give up, so you'd better just accept it already! I have to do this. I'm the man of the house."

Haro's mouth closed. The words 'I'm the man of the house' seemed to ring in the air. Haro looked a little like Itachi had socked him the face. For a moment, he seemed to reconsider, but pride swarmed shame and screwed his features in a mix of embarrassment and rage. Amaya still hadn't lifted her head from her knees.

Sakura clapped her hands. The way she did it created a sound like a thunder. Itachi 's gaze on Haro's reddening face broke. They both turned to look at Sakura.

She pursed her lips. "Isn't there anything you two like about each other?"

"The only thing I like about Itachi is that Yukio hates his guts," Haro snarled.

"I don't like you either," Itachi shot back.

Amaya was silent. Her shoulders slumped.

Sakura sighed. "Okay. Enough. Tomorrow morning, at five am, I want all three of you be at the training grounds on the east side of the village. Bring your ninja gear. The only way you can prove that you *deserve* to be Genin is to pass my test." There was a grim finality to her tone that shook Itachi out of his anger. He swallowed nervously. "Those of you who can demonstrate that you know how to be Shinobi will train with me. The rest I'll send back to Academy."

"What do we have to do to pass?" Itachi asked.

Sakura gave him a smile, but it wasn't a pleasant smile. He remembered suddenly that this woman had punched the Hokage in the eye.

"Survive."

"You wanted to see me?" Lucia asked Naruto.

They were alone in the Hokage's office.

"Is it about Itachi?"

"Hmm," Naruto replied. "No."

He crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair behind his desk. Lucia sat opposite him on the same stool her son had taken his picture on a few days ago. Lucia's face was perfectly pale and serene, almost like ivory. When he looked at her, Naruto always had the impression that he was reading a mystery. She wrapped intrigue about her like a shawl.

He peered at her for a moment and decided to be blunt.

"I want to apologize to you."

Lucia's brow furrowed.

"I've been trying to give you space to allow you to get adjusted, but it's important you hear this. Sasuke shouldn't have accosted you in your home. He'll be disciplined, but I want you to know that I take responsibility, because he's one of mine."

Lucia's expression was interesting to watch. At first she was startled. Then she seemed thoughtful. In the next instant, her face was so smooth he almost doubted having seen any change. "Thank you," she said.

Hmm. Naruto was fairly sure Lucia was suspicious of him. She seemed like someone used to dealing with people who hid their real thoughts and intentions. She assumed everyone was like that, Shinobi especially, no doubt. She was like that herself. Naruto had learned that people expected others to think and behave the way they thought and behaved. Lucia was the sort of person for whom trust came slowly if it came at all.

The question was why.

He leaned back and crossed his arms. When Naruto first met Lucia, he had been struck by a powerful feeling—a gut feeling—about her. He felt quite sure that Lucia was dangerous. At the same time, he didn't feel threatened by her. Unfortunately, gut feelings, like faith, were difficult to qualify. It didn't help that he knew she was hiding something. And then there was the masochism. In short, he had a lot of questions. He intended to ask them.

"I want to get to know you," he said.

"Pardon?"

"I'd like to know more about your life. I know you don't trust me, and I think you think I don't trust you. I'd like to change that."

Her lips twitched in a smile. She probably thought he was trying to get information from her by playing nice. "I see."

"You have to go to the bank, right? Is this week soon enough?"

She eyed him hesitantly, almost as if she didn't believe what she was hearing.

"Because you need money," Naruto reiterated. "You said you have accounts your husband didn't know about, and you need that money to take care of your family."

"Yes," she said. "A trip is necessary to access them. If not, I will be dependent on your charity."

And she would rather not be. She was that sort of person. He could tell she was surprised he had brought this up. She had thought she would have to fight him about it, or be refused outright. Instead, he suggested it to her. Probably she was thinking that was a ploy too. Naruto tried to make it look like he was coming to a decision he had already made.

"I would have to send a guard with you," he said.

"I would insist on having one."

He nodded. After all, it wasn't just her children that were targets. There could be Shinobi looking for her by now.

"You'll be watched," he told her. It was important to be honest.

Her expression didn't flicker a hair. "I suppose that is necessary."

She definitely thought he was suspicious of her, and he couldn't say he wasn't, but what was interesting was how willing Lucia was to cooperate. Until recently, he had been thinking about what he *didn't* know, what she *didn't* say, that he ignored what she *did* . She accepted being watched. She accepted being guarded. She accepted an investigation. She didn't even mind giving them her children to train however they pleased. She didn't raise a storm or cause a fuss. The possibility had occurred to him suddenly: was there something she *expected* them to find out but *couldn't* speak of herself?

"An elite guard," Naruto continued, "even for a short trip to town is expensive."

She raised her eyebrows slightly. "You want me to pay you?"

He grinned. "Well, you did say you had funds!"

"I see," she said. "I can pay, on arrival, but if I'm paying, I want a full team of Jounin."

He nodded. She smiled.

In this, she trusted him. She trusted business transactions more than they did favors. It was strange to him. He would have given her a guard for free.

But he had learned something. Lucia was familiar with Shinobi fees, and even when he asked her for money, she was cooperative, almost unbelievably cooperative.

He would need to send a sophisticated team to go with her, one that was experienced at tracking and surveillance, one that could keep both eyes on Lucia while also watching everything else, and do it discreetly. Damn. He was just getting used to Hinata being around again.

It was after dark before Lucia's children straggled home.

She had spent the afternoon in puzzled thought, about Konoha's Hokage mostly, only to realize that Itachi and Rina hadn't come home at the usual time.

All contemplation turned to panic, until she remembered that it was Itachi's first day as a Genin. They must have stayed at school late. She made dinner and waited for them, tapping her fingers on the table until she heard the door open.

To her surprise, they arrived separately. Rina came home first. When Lucia demanded to know where she had been and why Itachi wasn't with her, Rina mumbled something about Itachi telling her to study at a friend's house. Lucia wondered what studying and what friend, but only had time to tell her daughter not to be out without her mother knowing exactly where she was before her son walked in the door.

Itachi was more explicit than his sister.

"I met my team today," he said over dinner. "And my instructor. I asked Rina to go to a friend's house. I'm sorry. I didn't know she wasn't going to tell you."

"I see," Lucia said. "And how did it go?"

"Sakura Haruno is my Genin teacher! Can you believe it? Rina, please pass the sugar."

Her son ate like a ravenous animal. It seemed to Lucia that he was growing before her eyes. She could see that his wrists already stuck out past the ends of his sleeves. Soon his shoes would be too small. So fast.

"But I'm in trouble," he added between swallows. "I'm….terrible. My teammates hate me. Well, one of them does anyway."

"Hmm," she said, resting her cheek against her palm. "How could anyone hate you?"

Her son half choked on his food. She supposed he thought it was kind of thing only a mother might say, but she was quite serious.

"Well, how do you feel about them?" she asked. "Which one hates you?"

"Haro Akamatsu. He's angry a lot, but he's got it out for me."

"I see."

Itachi didn't handle other people's anger well. He didn't like confrontation. The only kind of anger he was accustomed to was Gehard's. Neither of her children seemed to have much in the way of tempers. It took a lot to unsettle Itachi and Rina jumped straight from impervious to tears.

"And your other teammate?"

Her son did a peculiar thing. He looked away, flushed slightly, and mumbled under his breath.

"Pardon?" Lucia prompted him.

"Amaya Satou."

Ah. A girl. A pretty girl by the sound of it. Lucia tried not to even smile.

Across the table, Rina giggled. "Itachi likes her."

"Don't start, Rina!" Itachi barked at her. "Remember Anton Landseer?"

Rina turned bright pink.

"Okay," Lucia said coolly. "Be nice to each other. When do you start training, Itachi?"

He sighed and slumped in his chair. "Maybe never. Sakura is going to test us tomorrow, and if any of us don't pass, we get sent back to Academy. She said it was a *survival* test. I don't think Haro even wants me to *live* ."

Lucia wondered how serious she should take that. Certainly this path would expose her son to dangers, but danger was inevitable. She wished she knew more about how the village was run. She knew very little about Sakura Haruno. "What matters is what you want," she told Itachi. "If you really want it, I know you will do fine."

"Thanks," he said. He didn't sound as convinced.

"Don't forget you have accounting homework."

"Tonight?"

"It won't take you long, and it will calm you down. When you are done, go to bed. Don't forget to eat breakfast tomorrow. You will

need energy for survival."

He grumbled only half heartedly before conceding.

After dinner, Rina went to bed while Itachi did his accounting homework. Lucia watched her son scratch out answers while she cleared the table.

"I'm going to take a trip to the bank this week," she told him, "so you'll need to take care of Rina for a few days. I've asked the Akimichis to be available to help you if you need anything."

"Is that safe?" he asked, looking up from his work. "For you, I mean. Couldn't Gehard be here by now?"

"The Hokage is sending me with an escort of Jounin. There's nothing to worry about."

Itachi didn't say anything for a few moments. He worked out another problem, and then another. When he did speak, it was with the sort of hesitancy that made her set the dishrag down on the counter to listen. "Mom," he said. "Why did you bring us here?"

So he suspected she was planning something. Lucia didn't respond immediately. Instead, he joined him at the table. She waited until he looked at her. "I want you to be a Shinobi. I want you to know how to protect yourself, and your sister."

"Then why did you give me a choice when we got here?"

"Just because I want something doesn't mean you will do it. It is important that the choice is yours."

She could see the question in his eyes. "Why is it so important? You keep asking about my training. I mean, as long as we stay here, we're safe, right? Why do I have to learn to protect myself?"

Her son was becoming inquisitive. That was a recent change. He used to believe and do anything she said. As she thought about her

answer, she stared into her empty teacup from dinner. The tea leaves had settled at the bottom. Some people thought it was possible to see the future by reading the shapes of such things. She was the sort to believe that the future must be made.

"I want you to have an investment in this place. I want you to understand what life for a Shinobi is like."

"I want to do it," he said. "I don't want to be weak, but I don't know why you want me to. Is it because of my f…" He stumbled. "Is it because of Itachi Uchiha? Do you want me to know what his life was like or something?"

What a painful question! But not an entirely unexpected one. Lucia supposed he must wonder about it. After all, she wondered about it too. She wondered about it whenever she looked into the face of her child. When Itachi was born, she hadn't been able to stop thinking about his father.

What must Itachi Uchiha's life have been like? She knew only such a small part. Itachi was not born cruel. She knew that much. She knew it the first night he touched her. There was a gentleness there that had to be deeply innate. The way he had run his hands over her skin was the caress of a man who at one time in his life had dreamt of being a lover. No. The cruelty had come out later. During the long nights he wasn't beside her, she had reasoned that Itachi Uchiha must have lived cruelty, lived it so completely that he had grown accustomed to it, and even became dependent on it for survival. Something so horrific must have happened to him that he needed cruelty for anything to make sense. His must have been a life of painful compromises. She understood that too well. For some people, happiness was not expected. It was not even supportable. In some situations, a little tenderness between bouts of pain was the most you could hope for—even transient, illusionary tenderness was better than nothing. She and Itachi were the same that way. They had traded on that currency. Perhaps that was *all* they had.

Did she want her son to experience *that* ? To live like that?

"No," she said.

Absolutely not. She absolutely did not want that life for her son.

He was staring intently at her face.

"Whatever Itachi Uchiha's life was like, that will not be your life. What I want you to focus on right now is your teachers and your teammates and your training. From there you will make your own way in the world. Your own way. Don't forget that. Anything will be possible for you."

He frowned. "But as a Shinobi, I'll have missions."

She regarded his expression with interest. "Do you remember the first rule of our household?"

He nodded.

"Good."

He looked confused. "But that doesn't apply anymore. And even if it did, what does it have to do with anything?"

She looked again into her teacup. The leaves formed ambiguous shapes. As to what they meant, she had decided long ago. Nothing anyone did could change the future now. It was just a matter of time. It had begun with a baby. It had been twelve years of work, twelve terrifying years, but the wait was almost over. She was very close. She lifted her eyes and smiled at her son over the rim.

"You remember what I told you on your tenth birthday?"

She watched as his confusion was replaced by astonishment.

TBC

I'm looking at where I'm at and how much more there is to cover. Wow…lol. Also, just if you're wondering, Itachi's training doesn't

follow the Naruto plotline continuously. I throw in parallels on purpose, but it ends up being quite different. There should be action next chapter!

It's my birthday on Monday. I am planning to get kittens. Please review.

Chapter 9

Warnings : This fanfic is for 16+ readers (rated M). It contains sexual references , mature themes (including sado-masochism...described vaguely but not "shown"), some violence, a very little bit of swearing, and other material. , This fic FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES for this site so please do not report it as MA. There are no explicit sex scenes. All such scenes "cut off" before anything happens. Violence is typical for a story about ninjas. There isn't anything extremely disturbing described in any detail.

White Rain

Chapter 9

By Zapenstap

"How are your ribs?" Sakura called softly as she pulled on her right boot.

Sasuke's answer floated back from the kitchen. If she was really concerned, he said, she could try not to be so rough with him.

Sakura blushed.

It was early—practically the middle of the night. The only evidence of morning was that the dark blue of the sky through the window was several shades lighter than an hour ago. She yawned and leaned back on her hands. After setting up, should she be on time? Or make the kiddies wait like Kakashi had made her team wait?

The very thought made her cross. She would be on time.

As she was tightening her wrist guards, Sasuke walked out of the kitchen and leaned against the wall, watching her from a short distance away. There was tenderness in his expression, which was not uncommon after a night like this one. That expression was more

precious to her than air. She caught her breath, warmth radiating out from her heart to the tips of her fingers and toes. It wasn't that he wanted her, though she could still feel the imprints of his fingers on her skin. It was that he loved her.

The expression lingered only briefly. It vanished when he saw her noticing. It was still there, she knew, but covered up now. He still wasn't comfortable being open, not even with her.

Sakura stood up. The movement caused the bells tied to her wrist to jingle.

Sasuke eyed them with a small smile. "Bells?" He smirked at her. "Is that how you're going to test them?"

Sakura tucked her hair behind her ears. "You mean am I going to tie them to my belt and read a book while my students try to grab them? No way! I have something else in mind. You know Kakashi only did it that way because he was lazy. He wanted to test us without exerting himself so he made us to do all the work."

Sasuke smirked. "What work did you do?"

She blushed again.

Sasuke crossed the room toward her. Her heart beat faster when he approached, an unconscious reaction to his proximity she had never quite been able to quell. "Nervous?" he whispered.

His voice was like silk.

"Is it obvious?" she asked.

It wasn't the test that made her nervous, of course. She could lay out all three of those kids with one finger, even if they figured out how to work together as a team. Being an instructor was so much more than that, though. It was an important bond, vital to the village, and an enormous commitment.

She wanted to do it, but Sakura wasn't sure she knew how to teach. It was her first time attempting it, and she had seen the look in the eyes of Haro and Amaya when she told them it was her first year.

She knew she ought to have more confidence. Contrary to what her students believed, they hadn't been put on a team together because Amaya was nice to Itachi. Naruto had ideas about who would make each Genin a good teacher, and for this bunch, that teacher was Sakura.

Haro would benefit from a seasoned healer as an instructor. Love of taijutsu or not, he had ability, just like everyone else in his family, all of whom Sakura was acquainted with from her years of work at the hospital. Amaya's situation was a little more personal. Naruto thought a female role model would be good for her. Amaya's mother died on a mission when she was just a toddler. Her father was a Jounin, a near-silent, hardened captain who had reportedly raised her more like a recruit than a daughter. As for Itachi, he needed to be tested more than the rest of them, to see if he was really ready for this.

Sakura bit her lip and stole a glance at Sasuke. He hadn't said a word about Itachi. Not a single word. It was as if he simply pretended the kid did not exist.

"It will be fine," he said.

He meant her test. "Yeah," she said. "I'll see you later?"

Sasuke nodded.

Itachi stood in the kitchen, dressed and ready, waiting for the sun to rise. He hadn't been able to sleep much, but he felt alert. His energy was the nervous sort.

He was surprised when his mother came downstairs. She passed him on her way to the cabinet.

"When are you going to the bank?" he asked.

"I hope to go as soon as possible," she said. "If I am gone when you return, I can trust you to take care of Rina?"

"Yeah," he said, "if I live through this test."

She smiled at him.

He didn't think she was taking this seriously.

Itachi tried to think of everything he knew about survival tests, but there were so many thoughts bouncing around in his head he had trouble focusing on any one thing. He blankly watched his mother move about the kitchen. She was making him breakfast.

"I don't think I can eat anything," he said as she set a bowl of cereal at the table.

She poured the milk without hesitating. "Nonsense. Sit. If you don't eat, you won't have any strength."

Itachi ate glumly. He didn't really taste anything, but he felt less nervous when he was finished. He set the empty bowl in front of him and looked out the window. The sun still wasn't up yet. He looked at his mother. She was watching him circumspectly from behind the counter.

"You have a question," she guessed.

"It's about…" Itachi trailed off, worked moisture into his mouth, and started over. He could tell from the serenity in her expression that she knew what it was about. "It's about what you said last night."

He had been so astonished he had just gone to bed without a word. But now he couldn't stop thinking about it.

His mother leaned her chin into her palm, one elbow on the counter, and waited. Dark hair spilled over pale shoulders, natural curl

creating waves she had done nothing to style. Her brown eyes were bright and luminous. She didn't look like a frightening person, but she frightened him a little.

The first rule in the family was not to talk about money.

Growing up, Itachi had always known his family was wealthy. It wasn't possible for that fact to have escaped him. The home he had lived in before now wasn't the largest house in his neighborhood, but it was elegant-white marble floors, a wide open foyer, circling staircases with cherry wood banisters, and extra bedrooms nobody used. His mother and Gehard had had servants too, not live-in servants, but people who regularly did the cooking and the cleaning and maintained the grounds.

On his tenth birthday, his mother told him a little about how wealthy they were, and more than he wanted to know about where it came from. She told him it was important that he be told, because the other kids would surely hear the rumors. But he mustn't talk about it.

The thing was… he thought they had left all that behind when they left Gehard. He thought they had tossed everything. He had admired his mother for doing it, because to him it meant she valued her family, her kids, more than her comfortable life and nice things. But from what his mother said last night, the family fortune was still hers in some respect, and set to pass to him if he lived to inherit it. If that was true, he wondered why his mother had married Gehard, only to have a child with someone else, and then stayed with Gehard, only to leave him ten years later. He had a feeling it was something ugly.

"Well?" she asked.

Looking at her face, he couldn't speak. She was a beautiful woman. Anyone would say so. He wasn't sure if she realized how much he knew about just how ugly her life was.

"I was just thinking about what it means."

There was a crinkle on her brow just above the bridge of her nose. He didn't think she had any idea he knew anything.

But she was his mother. He was always watching her.

He wondered which of the things people back home said about her were true. The other kids' parents all knew about Lucia Van Alstyne, and their children all said things in whispers. Jered Lassen had called his mother a whore, based on a rumor that Itachi's mother had gotten richer over the years by sleeping with men and taking their money, but he was pretty sure that was false, the kind of rumor that arose from jealousy—and the lapse that led to his own existence, of course. But there were other rumors about her.

She was called vicious, ruthless, unfeeling, commandeering, a bitch, and most of all: obsessed with wealth. It was said that money was all she cared about. Some of her business dealings had soured relations with neighboring families. Women hated her at first sight. Men mostly liked what they saw, until they knew her better, and then they hated her too.

But it was uglier than that. Itachi had seen his mother deal often enough to know she was indifferent to being hated, but she must *like* to be hurt. It didn't make sense to him, but he knew what her relationship with Gehard was like. He knew what the black vase meant. Did she really think keeping him out of the house when it was happening would be enough to keep him from knowing? The sickening truth grew more obvious with each passing day. Why would someone of her wealth and status put up with being hit and controlled unless she *liked* it? Gehard had even said she did, and she hadn't denied it.

Sometimes Itachi hated her. He hated that she forced him to acknowledge and accept awful things about her, his mother, who he couldn't help but love. He loved her more than he hated her. Since they moved away, he had felt better about everything. His mother seemed…lighter in this country, more at peace with herself. Simpler. He was happy having next to nothing in exchange for that.

But she hadn't relinquished anything. Not a damn thing. He wasn't sure what to feel.

"It means that someday things will change," she said. "Don't worry about it now. Just do your best. Make friends. You will be glad of people whose trust you had to earn."

Itachi didn't say anything. His mother's face was implacable, but she looked somehow sad to him, and lonely. Make friends he could trust. He wondered if this was a lesson she learned the hard way. Aside from his aunt Cecile, her older sister, Itachi's mother didn't have any friends. Maybe she hated herself, and that was why— But it didn't quite seem to fit.

"The sun is rising," she said.

He looked out the window. Sure enough, there was a faint gleam of gold spreading across the horizon.

He stood up and smiled at her. "Wish me luck, okay?"

Amaya and Haro were waiting on the highest hill on the east training grounds when Itachi arrived. They were both sitting in the grass, dressed head to toe in their best fighting gear, decked out in all their weapons. Haro wore his headband tied to his upper arm. Amaya wore it around her neck. Itachi just had the basics: kunai knives, wire string, and headband on the forehead. He didn't even have a mesh shirt.

He was going to get clobbered.

"Hey," Amaya said to him as he approached. She smiled. He smiled back.

"We were wondering if you got lost," Haro added, "or forgot to wake up again."

Itachi took a deep breath. "I've been up for hours actually. I didn't sleep well."

"Me either," Amaya said.

Haro eyed Amaya sideways. "I slept like a baby."

"I see you are on time!"

They all turned.

Sakura strode up the hill toward them from the east. The training grounds were located a ways outside the east end of town. Bushy-topped trees with thick trunks and level branches surrounded them on all sides. The highest hill was little more than a grassy knoll, a nice place for a picnic in other circumstances.

Sakura didn't look to be in the mood for a picnic. Her face was grim. She was outfitted for battle too. Amaya and Haro scrambled to their feet, hands hovering over their weapons pouches.

"All right," Sakura said, waving her hands. "Calm down. I'm not going to attack you."

His teammates relaxed, but only marginally. Amaya's expression seemed entirely different. She was focused now. Fierce.

"This is going to be a practice mission," Sakura told them. "I don't know if you were told, but not just anyone has what it takes to be a ninja. In order to pass my test, you have to demonstrate Shinobi qualities. The mission is simple."

She pointed into the forest the way she had come. "About half a day's journey due east you will find the ruins of an old well. Hidden near the well are two bells. Your mission is to bring both bells back to this spot."

"That's it?" Haro asked suspiciously. "Walk for a day and bring back some bells? I thought it was a survival test."

"There's a catch," Sakura said. "Only those who are actually carrying the bells will be deemed as having successfully completed the mission. There will also be…obstacles. If none of you are able to make it back with the bells, then none of you are capable of being my students. I have no qualms about flunking all three of you."

Haro and Amaya exchanged glances. Amaya looked surprised. Haro grinned. Itachi felt like his stomach had dropped out of his body and was squirming somewhere on the ground by his feet. Only two bells. That meant only two could pass. This test would be a great way for Haro to get Itachi off his team! All he had to do was make sure he and Amaya were the only two to return with bells. That would probably be easy.

Was Sakura doing this on purpose? Was she, like Sasuke, disgusted by him? Did she want him to lose?

He tried not to be paranoid. She had been nice to him before. Maybe there was some other reason for only having two bells.

"Oh," Sakura added. "I almost forgot. You only have until sundown. If you don't make it back by the time the sun drops below the horizon, you will fail. Good luck!"

With that, she vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Clone," Amaya murmured. She peered east. "That means the real Sakura is out there in the forest somewhere."

"Obstacles!" Haro spat. "It's a survival test, isn't it? She's going to try and kill us."

Itachi swallowed. She wouldn't really, would she? Haro often exaggerated.

"I didn't even eat breakfast," Amaya sighed. "Oh well. I guess we should get started."

Haro glanced askance at Itachi. "All of us?"

"Of course," Amaya said.

Haro's eyes didn't change. "There are two bells. One for you. One for me."

Itachi felt his muscles tense. He wasn't sure how to respond. Haro spoke with blatant honestly, as if Itachi wasn't even there.

"But we are a team," Amaya objected. Her voice was composed and practical. Her eyes, usually clear and warm, were hard and focused. "Even if only two can pass, we should stick together. I don't want to leave Itachi behind."

Haro clenched his jaw. She looked back at him, chin lifted, slender and pale in the morning light, her short, light brown hair washed out against the backdrop of a sky blushing pink and gold. For several long seconds, they stared at each other.

At length, Haro just shrugged angrily. "Whatever. I don't care. Do what you want."

Amaya recoiled as if stung.

"I'm not going to just let you two have the bells anyway," Itachi interjected. "I'm coming whether you want me with you or not."

"Fine," Haro snapped. "Keep up. If you can." He turned a cold shoulder to him and Amaya both and bolted, charging down the hill and veering eastward toward the forest.

"Haro!" Amaya cried. She tore after him. "Wait!"

Itachi opened his mouth to call her back, but stopped himself. Amaya caught up with Haro at the bottom of the hill and grabbed his arm just above the elbow. The pair of them exchanged words. Haro's were heated enough to make Amaya cringe, but she followed him when he shook her hand off his arm. They vanished together under

the boughs of the trees. Itachi followed. He had a bad feeling about this.

The shadows thickened as he descended the hill and moved in under the trees. He caught sight of Amaya and Haro standing just a few dozen feet inside the forest. So they hadn't left him after all. Were they waiting? Or maybe they had just paused long enough to hash a plan. Maybe the plan was to ditch him. Haro avoided looking in his direction. Amaya's eyes skimmed over his face, but drifted to the left before he caught her eyes. Just as he was about to approach, Haro darted deeper into the forest, Amaya hot on his heels.

Itachi followed, grinding his teeth.

This is stupid, Itachi thought.

He slowed his pace, keeping Amaya and Haro in his sights, but didn't try to catch them. He didn't want to be where he was not wanted. They obviously didn't want him close—or Haro didn't anyway-and he needed to think. Someone should. They had no plan, other than to get to the well, retrieve the bells, and return them to the hill by sundown, and that was no plan at all. It was foolish to charge in blindly.

He supposed that even if Amaya and Haro reached the bells first, it was smart for one person to lag a little behind, especially if there were going to be obstacles.

"Hey," he called ahead. He wasn't sure if they were listening, but he thought Amaya may have turned her head slightly. "I think it would be better if one person scouted ahead. We'd be safer in a line."

Amaya whispered to Haro, who stopped on a bough of a tree.

Itachi stopped when they did, still keeping back, but he was close enough to hear her say "it's a good idea" in an urgent voice. She cast an anxious look back at him.

"You lead," Haro said to her. "You're swifter. I'm more suited to be a middle guard. If something goes wrong, I can support you."

It seemed to be decided without any further input from Itachi. It occurred to him that he had no idea what either of his teammates could do, other than that both were inevitably more accomplished than he was at everything. Not that they were much of a team. A duo, plus one tagalong.

They moved on. This time Amaya took the lead, staying ahead of Haro. Itachi couldn't make her out. He couldn't hear her either. She hardly made a sound.

The trip inward was eerily easy. They passed through the forest in silence. Itachi kept an eye out for signs of traps and tried to imprint the terrain the way he had learned from Konohamaru, since they would have to recover this ground after they reached the well and got the bells. He thought that he wouldn't get lost at least. That was something. A few weeks ago he wouldn't have been able to tell one tree from another.

He felt a change in the air before he saw anything. The surge of chakra came from up ahead. It was so concentrated, he knew he had only a second to react.

Just ahead of him, a tree exploded.

A branch came flying through the air, straight at Itachi's face. As he ducked to avoid it, he recognized it as the one Haro had been standing on it. Wood chips blasted into the air like confetti. They fell like rain. Itachi dropped out of the tree and crouched in the undergrowth below, staying perfectly still.

When he looked up, Haro was gone. So was most of the tree. In its place was a trunk with a hole through it two hand spans wide. The top of the tree shuttered, teetered for a few moments in slow motion, and then toppled in the direction opposite from Itachi.

Amaya was right in its path.

"Amaya!" Itachi called out.

He saw a flash of brown hair just as the tree crashed into the forest with a boom that shook the ground. There was still no sign of Haro. And somewhere out there—

"Don't you know better than to call out and not *move* ?"

Sakura!

Itachi swore and rolled out of the way. A fist slammed where he had been lying. He felt the surge in chakra, identical to what had blasted through that tree. He scrambled, tried to run, but found himself flying, his feet just leaving the ground as it heaved and split into chunks. He landed heavily, palms scraping painfully in the dirt. He didn't think about it. His darted into the bushes, crawling over some sort of thorny plant that made his eyes water and his skin itch—thistle? His eye cast frantically for a place of safety and landed instead on the branch that had been previously attached to Haro's tree. Sakura was right behind him.

He cast about for a substitution. His hands clumsily formed signs.

The jutsu was worse than ungainly, but it worked. Leaving the substitution behind, he doubled back through the underbrush and hid behind the trunk of a thick tree. He didn't breathe any easier until he managed to catch a glimpse of Sakura.

She didn't even bother to hide. She was inspecting his substitution with a frown on her face, probably because it was sloppy. Maybe she was disappointed. Maybe she was thinking of failing him right now. Or maybe that wasn't even the real Sakura. Hell, it could just be a clone to lure him out of hiding or psyche him into thinking he was safe.

He leaned back against the tree trunk and took deep breaths. This was confusing. He stayed where he was, heart beating so loudly that he could scarcely hear beyond the pounding.

" *Hey* ."

It was Haro's voice, whispering to him from the bracken just beyond his left shoulder.

He was about to respond, but his jaw clamped shut. What if it wasn't Haro? What if it was Sakura again, using Haro's form to trick him?

There were so many things they should have done before entering the forest! They should have made passcodes and agreed on a strategy. He wasn't sure he had really believed Sakura would attack them. She was so nice. He thought Haro had been exaggerating, but Sakura wasn't playing around.

He wasn't taking this seriously enough. He should have been training morning to night every day he was in Academy. Any of those punches could have killed him. The place where he had been hiding was completely demolished. If he had stayed there—

" *Hey* !" Haro insisted. "Get over here, will ya?"

Itachi swallowed. He would have to chance it. If that was the real Haro, maybe they would have a shot together. If he did nothing, he was as good as dead—or failed at least. Besides, hiding was cowardly. He moved toward the voice as stealthily as he knew how.

Haro was crouching behind a row of thick bushes, his face staring intently at the spot where Sakura had been standing a moment ago. He looked angry, and that made Itachi feel better. The real Haro always looked like that. Itachi hoped the direction of his stare meant Sakura was still in the open and not lurking somewhere behind them.

"Where's Amaya?" Itachi asked.

"About to be discovered," Haro replied. He pointed up into the branches just above Sakura's head. Itachi couldn't see anything, but he believed Haro that Amaya was there somewhere. "She'll have to attack." Haro chewed his lip.

"What should we do?"

Haro screwed his mouth to one side. "Well, ideally I'd like you to go in and distract Sakura so Amaya can make her move and I can get to the bells, but…" He eyed Itachi askance. "You don't have the skills."

Itachi didn't say anything. He could run or shout or throw a kunai knife, he supposed. He could do it while looking like somebody else maybe. That was about it. He didn't have any attack jutsu.

"So," Haro said. "You get the bells. And Amaya and I will tag team Sakura. It might work better like that anyway. I know what Amaya can do. I can anticipate her."

"You should look like me when you do it," Itachi suggested. "It will surprise Sakura."

Haro grinned, though not at Itachi. His eyes never left Sakura. "Not a bad idea." He gestured to the right. "The bells are that way," he said. "I know exactly where the well is. Just head east. It will be just on the other side of a slope. Should be lots of ferns leading up and over, and then a dip into an area cleared of trees. The well is in the middle."

Itachi nodded. He just hoped he wasn't being duped.

"Okay," Haro said. "Go."

Itachi rose.

"Don't look back."

Itachi paused. "Why shouldn't I look back?"

Haro was already moving the other way. "It would be stupid if you got caught in Amaya's jutsu."

Itachi didn't look back. He darted forward, keeping under cover as much as possible.

The distance wasn't far. He was already inching his way up the slope with the ferns when he heard the blast.

Don't look back! he reminded himself.

He almost didn't have to. Whatever Amaya justu did, it created a flash that momentarily turned everything white. Even not looking directly at it, he had to shake stars out of his eyes in order to see anything.

His hands stung. He had sliced his palms on something when Sakura discovered him in the underbrush. The cuts hurt every time he touched anything, but not enough to slow him down. It would be nice to have some hand guards, but he made good time, keeping low and trying to stay hidden as he moved.

When he reached the top of the slope, he lowered himself to his stomach among the leaves, sticks, and ferns. He wouldn't be reckless twice. Just because Sakura was behind him didn't mean she wasn't also in front of him!

He could see the old well. It was made of stone, half buried in the dirt. It didn't look to have been used in some time, judging by the rust on the pump and the moss caking the large stone blocks, some of which were broken. He didn't see any bells. He would have to look for them, which would leave him vulnerable.

He put his hands together, formed the tiger sign, and concentrated, expelling the necessary chakra in one straight burst.

His clone knew what it was supposed to do. It was strange to watch himself clamber down the slope and cautiously approach the well.

He watched the area around him as much as the clone, using his ears and sense of smell as much as his eyes. Now he knew what an animal felt like. He shivered. To live being hunted, the target of dangerous predators—nerve wracking.

Well, he supposed it was something many Shinobi experienced, especially those wanted by their own kind. His father for example…

He didn't want to think about it.

His clone was looking in every nook and cranny around the well. When it apparently didn't find the bells easily, it began poking about in the grass on the ground close to it. The real Itachi watched from the slope. His clone thought just like he did: search the most obvious areas first, then the most accessible, then the most difficult.

His clone frowned and straightened. The real Itachi felt his heart hammering in response. The bells weren't on the ground. That meant they were *inside* the well.

How hard did Sakura make this test?

He watched as his clone leaned over the edge of well and peered inside, probably along the wall where there light enough to see. She would have had to secure them somewhere where they wouldn't fall in—

"Caught ya."

The real Itachi stiffened, all the muscles in his body clenching as one, but the voice wasn't directed at him. It was directed at his clone.

Sakura emerged from behind a slender tree near the well. How she had managed to hide behind it in the first place, he had no idea. She put one hand on her hip and smiled as his clone pulled its head out of the opening of the well and turned to face her. Did clones have feelings? The other him looked scared out of its mind, but

determined too. It must be thinking what he was thinking. How was he to defend against her in the open?

As it turned out, he couldn't.

Sakura's fist smashed into the face of the other him. The surprise on the clone's face right before it vanished mirrored Itachi's own surprise. There was also surprise on Sakura's face as the clone dissolved into air. But then she smiled and began looking around. Her eyes went right to the slope.

Itachi froze. He didn't think she could see him, but the slope was the best vantage point for anyone watching the well. Of course she would look here first. It would only take her a moment to find him, and then he would be forced to fight her. There was no way he could win, even if she went really *really* easy on him.

Maybe he should retreat and come at the well from a different angle? But no. That wouldn't be any better. She would see him coming no matter what angle he came from. She would see him as soon as he moved. Better to face her head on.

Suppose he made another clone and used it to attack her while the real him went for the bells? He didn't think it would work, but it was his best bet. He needed better jutsu!

"Didn't I get *anything* from my father?" he muttered furiously under his breath. His looks apparently, which he wasn't finding terribly helpful. Where was all the promised Uchiha majesty?

His hands formed the tiger sign again. He wondered if he got any points for courage.

The second clone that materialized beside him looked as determined as he felt. Itachi rose to a crouch, poised on the balls of their feet. He took a deep breath. He could do this. As one, he and his clone sprang upright and charged down the hill, straight at Sakura. He saw her blue-green eyes widen fractionally just before he angled away

from her and made a wild zig zag for the well. His clone kept her attention, smashed into Sakura as if it were aiming to kick her, but vanished without making contact.

He only had seconds. Itachi's hands dipped into the well. He felt for the rock that jiggled and twisted his fingers under it. He grabbed the bells by the string they were tied to, dislodging the rock as he pulled his hand back. The rock fell. There was a breath of silence, and then a faint plop.

Seconds only. Sakura wasn't fooled. She was descending on him before he had time to do anything more than take one step backward, the two bells caught between his index and middle finger by the string that tied them together. He was flailing for purchase, completely out of ideas. She was coming right at him, gloved hand curling into a fist throbbing with chakra. His back hit a tree.

A shower of shuriken flew past him, missing both his shoulders by margins and plunging into the trunk behind his back.

Sakura froze in the air. Even her face was still, like a painting. The shuriken had come from behind her. It took Itachi a few seconds to process what had happened. Sakura's body had shielded him from a storm of shuriken thrown from behind her. She had been hit by the shuriken!

And then her body vanished, replaced by a bundle of stick that clattered to the ground at his feet, each punctured by a four pointed ninja star.

Itachi stared.

Amaya stood halfway down the slope, both arms held out, all the fingers on her hands extended, eyes wide with surprise.

"You're pretty good for a Genin," Sakura's voice whispered. It was hard to tell where it was coming from. Amaya's head whipped

around. Her fingers remained outstretched. Sakura was nowhere to be seen.

"Run, Itachi!" she shouted.

Of course. He had the bells. He didn't have to be told twice.

He shoes scuffed at the dirt as he dodged around the well and scrambled back up the slope and past Amaya. She didn't glance at him as he passed. Her eyes stayed on Sakura, who had dropped out of the trees on Amaya's other side. Amaya's hands moved. The shuriken she had thrown whipped backward the way they had come, flying up the hill toward Sakura.

There was a second flash of light. Itachi saw it this time. It was like the shuriken caught fire and exploded. For a few brief seconds, they blazed hot, like firecrackers, like tiny suns, until they could no longer be distinguished one from another. The ending blast was one powerful burst of white light, like a flash of lightning.

Itachi stumbled through the haze and dazzle, blinking repeatedly to clear away the spots that swam before his vision like fireflies. That, he was pretty sure, was not typical Genin level stuff.

He fingers clenched numbly around the string that held the bells. He needed to get them away from Sakura and back to the hill. With that one thought in his mind, he jumped over logs and leapt bushes, his feet pounding as hard as his heart. It wasn't until he was over halfway back and well out of range that he noticed how much his lungs burned.

"Whoa!"

Haro's voice.

Upon seeing his other teammate, Itachi skidded to a stop. He couldn't relax. His muscles trembled from adrenaline. His hand was clenched so tightly around the bells that the knuckles had turned

white. He was perspiring. He was dizzy. His chest burned. He still had some ground to cover.

"Haro," Itachi began. "What are you doing here?"

"Me? I'm hanging back in reserves. What are you doing?"

He was breathing so hard it was difficult to speak. "Amaya. Said. To. Run. I think—" He sucked in air, tried to articulate words, and bent forward, placing his hands on his knees. It helped a little.

"Did you get the bells?" Haro asked.

Itachi nodded. He was concentrating so hard on breathing he didn't process the dark expression creep across Haro's face. He saw Haro clench his jaw, but he wasn't ready for what came next.

Haro fist swung back and then forward in a swift jab, socking Itachi hard in the stomach. Trembling already from exertion and anxiety, Itachi's knees buckled and gave way. He collapsed like he was made of straw, pitching face-forward into the dirt. His hand was easily pried open.

"Sorry," Haro muttered.

Itachi felt the bells leave his grip.

Sakura tsked under her breath.

They had been doing pretty well too—well, sorta.

She crouched with most of her weight on the ball of one foot, the other leg stretched out in front of her along the tree branch. She peered carefully around trunk of the tree, watching as Haro punched Itachi in the stomach. The kid crumpled like paper.

Haro's reaction was interesting. He stood over his teammate, the bells gripped in his right fist. He didn't seem triumphant. His

expression was like that of a spooked rabbit, contradictory emotions battling for dominance. Tactically speaking, he should have run, but he didn't move. He just stood there, right hand clenched closed and shaking.

Sakura shook her head.

Maybe she should end it now. If this was how they were going to behave, she couldn't make use out of these three.

But they had until sunset to get it together. She remembered her own Genin test. Looking back on it, Kakashi had gone pretty easy on them. She had abandoned Naruto. She was useless even to save Sasuke. Her one contribution was to faint. Pathetic. Sasuke and Naruto hadn't been much better. But Kakashi had given them all another chance.

This group did have its good points. Itachi lacked skills, but wasn't a bad strategist. Haro was balanced, a solid addition to any team if he could straighten out his priorities and learn to take direction. And Amaya…She reminded Sakura a little of what Sasuke had been like as a Genin—focused, confident, and with more ability and skilled jutsu than a girl her age should have.

But that alone gave Sakura pause. Her jutsu was quite clever, probably something she had learned from her father. She fed her chakra into shuriken she used, probably slowly over time, compressed it like a bomb, and manipulated the stars with wire to maintain her connection. That level of control took a great deal of training. Sakura wondered at the reason for that. There was nothing in the girl's history that warranted that kind of focus.

That was it for good points. As a team, they were suspicious of each other, oblivious to one another's strengths and weaknesses, and horribly disorganized. Haro seemed to have a preference for Amaya that was as bad or worse than what Sakura had for Sasuke at his age, to the point of betraying others for her sake. Maybe it wasn't totally surprising. He was young and impulsive and male, Amaya

was awfully developed for a girl her age, and they had been friends for a long time. Not surprising, but definitely annoying. Sakura wanted laugh at herself for thinking so. How she must have looked to Kakashi!

Amaya's most obvious failing was trying to do all the heavy lifting on her own. She didn't seem to trust even Haro. At least, she didn't share the burden with either him or Itachi. Who was she trying to impress? If she hadn't tapped out on chakra yet, it wouldn't be long.

Itachi was smart and had a good attitude, but he was under-skilled. That could be fixed with experience. What worried Sakura about Itachi was that he didn't really know what he was getting into.

Sakura took a deep breath.

"I really hate to do this," she muttered aloud. But it was important. She brought the kunai knife into her best throwing hand.

"I hope you know this hurt me more than it hurts you," she said grimly.

Itachi's stomach felt like he had swallowed a pile of rocks, but he pushed himself off the ground and surged to his feet. He was so angry he saw red. He made an awkward grab for Haro's shoulder.

"If you're going to hit me, you better put me down!" he shouted.

Haro dodged Itachi's first punch, easily sidestepping it, and caught the second in his left hand.

Itachi channeled all of his power into his left leg and brought it up in a swift kick to Haro's head. Haro twisted somehow and managed to block the kick with his forearm, but he was shaking so badly Itachi almost connected anyway.

Rage deadened his wits even as it heightened his power. Itachi didn't sense a thing until it was too late. He was looking directly into Haro's wide eyes, so he knew immediately it wasn't something the other boy had done.

It felt like pain—searing, crippling, nauseating pain. It swallowed his anger completely. He half collapsed, instinctively put weight on his foot, and shirked as waves of agony shot through his leg and radiated upward and downward. He fell onto his forearm instead and looked down at his leg. The hilt of a kunai knife stuck out just below his knee.

"Don't!" Haro warned.

But the response was automatic. Itachi pulled it out. It came out smoothly, like butter, but blood gushed from the wound.

"Shit," Haro cursed. Kneeling beside Itachi, he pressed both hands to where blood was oozing out of Itachi's leg. "You're not supposed to pull it out! Don't you know anything? What if she had hit an artery?"

But Itachi wasn't thinking. He wasn't feeling much either. He saw the blood coming out of his leg and just felt sick, like he wanted to throw up. He couldn't seem to get enough air, and there was too much heat inside of him, as if all of his veins were on fire. He clutched at his chest, insensibly trying to stop his heart, not because it hurt, but because it was beating so fast and he kept thinking that the organ was going to pump all of his blood *out* of his body. His blood was hot. No one told him how hot blood was.

Amaya crashed out of the bushes. "Haro, what happened?

She knelt beside him. Itachi couldn't focus on her. With so much blood in him, why wasn't any of it getting to his brain?

Haro lifted Itachi's leg over Amaya's knees and directed her hands. "It's not bad if it stops bleeding quickly." Haro said. "Put your hands

here. Push hard!"

Itachi felt pressure on his leg, just on the underside of his knee. Amaya was leaning on him with the full weight of her upper body. It helped. He looked into her face, pale and grave, almost ashen, and covered with dirt.

"Looks like she got him pretty clean," Haro said. "It's not fatal, but we'll have to patch it. I might be able to put a small seal on it, like stitches. Best I can do." He was fishing in his tool pouch as he spoke, his hands red with Itachi's blood that was drying a dirty brown color. He withdrew a medical pad, a ball of gauze, and some tape.

"Where's Sakura?" Amaya asked, still leaning over Itachi, but looking around with eyes bright with alertness. "I don't like being in the open."

"She left," Haro said. "I saw her. She made sure I saw her. She's headed back to the hill."

Itachi grunted as Haro repositioned his leg. Amaya applied pressure until Haro replaced her hands with the pad and began winding the gauze around Itachi's upper calf. He had a strong grip. The wrapping was tight, but not so tight as to cut off all his circulation.

"You okay?" Haro asked him.

Itachi tried to decide. His whole leg was throbbing. He could still feel the blood pumping, trying to bleed through the bandages.

"I feel a little sick," he said. "And shaky."

"That's probably just adrenaline. Do you really think you are going to be sick? Are you anxious? Sleepy? "

Now that his leg was patched up, he felt a great deal better. "I don't think so."

"Good. That's good."

Trying not to think about his leg, or look at it, Itachi turned his head. The sun was going down. The bright orb was turning darker, the yellow deepening to burnt gold. Soon it would be orange and among the trees.

"You two had better go."

He could tell by their expressions that he had said something unexpected.

"You want us to *leave* you here?" Amaya whispered. She looked frantically at Haro.

Itachi sighed. He had wanted to pass. He wanted to be a Genin. But he supposed he would be a burden on any sort of real mission. Maybe it was better to stay in Academy.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll be fine. But you guys should graduate. I don't want to hold you back."

Haro didn't say anything for several long seconds.

"No," he said finally.

Itachi blinked. "You said I'll live. There's no reason—"

"No way. If I abandon you here, my family will clobber me. What if you go into shock or something? My brothers and sisters are all medical nin. They'd drop me in a ditch somewhere if I just left you. And my mother—" The horror on his face was descriptive enough of what she would do. He shook his head. "No way. I've got to take you to the hospital." He handed Amaya the bells. "Here. You take them."

"What?" she gasped. Her face was aghast.

Haro shoved them into her hands. They were smeared with dirt and blood. "Go on," he said. "You're the fastest, and out of the three of us, you did the most. You should graduate."

Her eyes shimmered. "But, Haro, we promised…"

"Don't, okay? You want it more than I do. Besides, the mission was to get the bells back by sundown. I'd rather that you do it than none of us do. Hell, if I have to repeat another year, I have to repeat. Yukio will still be annoying next year."

"Haro," Itachi objected. "Seriously, just leave me. It's fine."

"You, shut up!" Haro snapped at him. To Amaya he said, "Go. I'll take care of him."

She stood, not saying anything, the bells hanging limply in the curve of her fingers.

"You can make it if you run," Haro told her. "We'll come too if he's up to it."

"We'll be right behind you," Itachi agreed, ignoring Haro's glare. "I'd feel worse if you didn't."

"I…" She looked back and forth between them and clutched the Konoha headband tied around her neck. "Okay." She said it with a fierceness that sounded forced and took off westward, long legs flashing between the trees.

When she was gone, the forest was dead quiet.

Itachi leaned his head back with a groan.

"It's better if we wait for a stretcher," Haro told him. "You've got a clean wound, and my patch will keep it together, but you should still keep it elevated and not move until a real medical—"

"It's not much farther," Itachi said. "If you think I won't damage it much, I'd like to try and at least make it back."

Haro gave him a look that made him feel stupid, but he seemed to understand. "Fine," he said. "You can hobble." He rose and dusted

off his knees. "With help." He stretched out a hand, which Itachi eyed dubiously. "With me or not at all. You can wait for a stretcher."

Itachi wrapped his hand around Haro's wrist.

Itachi allowed Haro to help him up, and managed to bite back a cry when he felt the muscles around his wound protest at the shift. The blood was already clotting. He could feel the beginning of a scab tear as he got to his feet, but the bandages were pleasantly tight and Haro's patch must have been working because it didn't bleed again.

Once on his feet, he felt the throbbing worsen, but he also felt stronger than he thought he would. He had to lean against Haro, putting as little weight on his injured leg at possible. He hobbled just as Haro advised, half hopping and half limping.

"Thanks," he said after they had successfully covered about thirty feet and he was getting the hang of it. The sun was already starting to set. This was going to take forever. There was no accounting for it. They had lost. "I'm sorry," he said. "You really could have left me."

Haro just snorted. "No, I couldn't have. Don't worry about it."

"Right," Itachi said, "Your family would kill you. It's just—I know how much you hate my guts. This has got to be the worst."

"I don't hate you."

Itachi blinked. "You don't?"

"Nah. You thought I did?"

"Yeah." Itachi said.

"You just annoy me," Haro told him.

"I thought you thought I was terrible."

"You are. And that's annoying, but even more annoying than that is that you're doing really well considering you were in Academy for all of two weeks. It's annoying because of how little you've trained. It's like it just comes easy. It's pretty irritating."

"Oh."

They were both silent for another few minutes. Itachi concentrated on covering distance, one crippled step at a time.

"Besides," Haro said, clearing his throat. "I kinda think I deserve to fail."

Itachi wasn't sure how to respond.

"I mean because I hit you," he continued, not looking at Itachi's face as he explained. "I was just thinking I had to have a bell, and Amaya had to have a bell, and ninjas have to do unpleasant things sometimes, so what if I took you down? But right after I did it I wished I hadn't done it. It's one thing if you can't hack it. But it's something else to betray a teammate. I was going to let you hit me. I was going to let you have them back. And then Sakura… Well, she could have targeted me as easily as you. I didn't know she was there either. But she hit just you, even though I had the bells. I'm sure she did it on purpose. It was so precise. Well, I felt even worse, because it was my fault you were such an easy target in the first place, and I should know better."

Itachi didn't say anything for a few minutes. He wasn't sure where that put him and Haro, but he felt better. "Thanks," he said.

"Does your leg hurt?"

"Yeah," he said. It was throbbing. It was almost a relief to be trying to walk just for the distraction.

Haro smiled. "That's pretty cool. I've never actually been hit myself."

Itachi laughed.

By the time they reached the hilltop, it was long past dark. The sky was clear enough to see the stars, and the light was great enough that they didn't get lost picking their way through the shadows. Still, it was a relief to finally emerge from the trees.

They clambered awkwardly up the hill. Before them, Itachi could see Amaya standing in the pale moonlight, her head hanging down, her hands clenched into fists, legs locked at the knee. Sakura stood just behind her, arms crossed as she watched them climb toward her, Itachi mostly hopping with one arm on Haro's shoulder.

When they reached the top, Haro helped Itachi recline on the grass. He checked the bandages and re-elevated Itachi's leg.

"Well well," Sakura said. "You made it back. Itachi, glad to see you're not dead." She crossed her arms and frowned at Haro. "Haro, you shouldn't have failed this exam. Do you want to tell me where you went wrong?"

"Uh," Haro said uncertainly. "I guess it was from the start, or some time last week."

Itachi was startled. Even Sakura blinked.

"I've got a bad attitude," Haro said. "My mother always says I think like badger. I didn't want to work with Itachi. I just didn't want to, and I made it harder for everyone because I was so stubborn about it." He looked at Itachi. "I can't say you don't still annoy me, no offense—"

"None taken," Itachi replied automatically.

Haro turned back to Sakura. "—but a teammate is a teammate. I should have supported him. Even if I had gotten a bell back, I don't think I did a very good job on this test. I know I can do better. I'll do better next time."

Itachi swallowed. "He did do a good job on my leg," he said to Sakura. "Really."

"Thanks," Haro said in a gruff voice, but by his expression, he seemed pleased.

"Is that why you failed?" Sakura asked Itachi. "Because you were injured?"

Itachi's mouth went dry. "I'm not very good," he admitted. "And I know it, and I knew my teammates knew it. I thought I could just do my best, but I wasn't prepared, and my best wasn't good enough. I didn't ask for help either, and that makes me a burden to the team."

"I see," Sakura said.

"But I'm not going to give up," Itachi added. "My leg hurts, but I'm glad in a way. To be honest, I was a little scared about this whole thing, and I didn't even think I'd be attacked. But it wasn't so bad. Maybe next time I'll be strong enough to be more of an asset to my team."

Sakura nodded. "Well, I guess Amaya is the only one fit to be a Genin this time."

Amaya still hadn't lifted her head. When she did, her eyes were like liquid. "Actually, I don't want these," she said quietly, and held out the hand that clutched the bells, proffering them to Sakura. "I only brought them because Haro and Itachi both wanted me to, and because that was the mission, but I…" She shook her head. "Well, I had to do it, but I don't want to go on alone. I want to be with them."

Sakura took the bells without speaking. They clinked lightly as they passed from Amaya's fingers to Sakura's.

"Amaya," Haro whispered. "That's…You don't have to do that."

"It's okay," she said, and tossed her head back, smiling at him through a glossy layer of tears that made her eyes sparkle. "It's just one more year right? I can wait one more year."

Sakura's fingers closed over the bells. She closed her eyes, clenched her fist, and smiled. "I see."

She pocketed the bells and made her way across the grass to where Haro was kneeling behind Itachi.

"Let me see it," she said, and carefully unwound the bandage. Itachi winced as she pulled the gauze free from the clotted blood. The newly formed scab ripped loose. He took deep breaths and avoided looking at it.

"Not bad," Sakura said to Haro, who flushed a little.

Sakura held a hand over his leg. It pulsed with chakra that glowed light green like sea mist, nearly the same color as her eyes. Itachi closed his eyes and didn't realize what she was doing until she heard Haro gasp. All he knew was that his leg itched like crazy.

"Whoa!" Haro said. "That's—Not even my brother can do it that fast! That's incredible."

The pain was gone. Itachi's eyes flew open. Sakura still had her hand over his leg. His pants were ripped and there was blood everywhere, but the wound was closed up. It was forming a pink, puckered scar before his eyes, and even that was shrinking. He wiggled his toes. There was no throb, no pinch, no pain. "How did you do that?"

"Rapid cell re-growth," Sakura said, lifting her hand and leaning back on her heels. "It's an advanced medical ninjutsu. How do you feel?"

He stared at her. "Great."

"Dinner will help, I suspect," she said. "I'm sorry I had to do that to you in the first place. It's not really typical to purposefully injure students in the Genin test, but I needed to know how you would handle the kinds of things that really happen in the field. You did quite well, I'm pleased to say." She slapped her knees as she rose to her feet. "Are the three of you capable of walking to town for a celebratory meal? My treat."

"Celebratory?" Haro asked. "What the hell are we celebrating?"

Sakura beamed at them.

"Why, the formation of Team Four of course! Being a ninja isn't about bringing some bell back. Mission objectives are important, but being a Genin is about teamwork. It's about learning how to look out for each other and protect each other. I was worried for awhile, but…" She smiled. "You all passed."

Itachi was stunned. He had passed?

He got slowly to his feet, still expecting his leg to hurt, but it didn't.

As they headed back to town, this time as a group, Itachi could barely form thoughts. He had passed. He got stabbed in the leg and had to be half carried back—late—but he had passed. He was a Genin. And his team didn't even hate him. At least, he didn't think so. He looked back. Amaya and Haro walked with their heads bent close together, whispering. Haro was laughing. Amaya's eyes were glowing. She looked up, and smiled at Itachi. He felt suddenly light headed. Still…

"Something on your mind?" Sakura asked him.

He took a deep breath. "Are you going to train me?"

"That's the arrangement," she replied. "All of you will learn a lot before you are sent out on any dangerous missions. Of course, I can

only teach what I know and what you have aptitude to learn." She smiled. "But it's probable you have some aptitude for genjutsu."

"Great," he said heavily. "Because I don't want to be a liability to my team. I don't want to be behind."

She nodded. He chewed on his thoughts. She watched him thinking.

"Something else on your mind?"

"You're Sasuke's girlfriend, right?" he asked her. He hoped he wasn't offending her. "Is there any way he might train me, now that I'm a Genin?"

He looked at her face anxiously. She looked away.

"It's not you or anything!" he added hurriedly. "I think you're terrific. I'm glad I have someone like you as my teacher. I'm sure I will learn a lot. It's just— I want to get to know Sasuke."

She didn't answer right away. They walked together in the falling darkness. Shadows obscured Sakura's face.

"I don't have any connections here," he said when she didn't respond, trying not to sound as nervous as he felt. "I feel like there are a lot of things about myself that I don't know. I want to know about the Uchiha, and the Sharingan, and about Sasuke, and about my father too. Especially my father. I don't know hardly anything about him. If there's any way—"

"You can ask him," she interrupted. Her voice sounded a little choked. "I don't know what he'll say, but you can ask."

Naruto nodded to Lucia as she reclined in the sitting chair before his desk.

He had sent a messenger for her at noon. She arrived promptly. A small traveling bag packed for a short trip sat at her feet. It was three days to the town with the bank Lucia said she needed to visit.

"You sure you don't want to wait to see if your son passes his Genin test?" Naruto asked. "I didn't know it was today. You can set out just as easily tomorrow."

"I'm confident he will pass," she said. "If he doesn't, then he wasn't ready. There's no need to delay my trip."

Naruto leaned back, assaying her frankly. She spoke about her son in an almost business-like tone, but Naruto thought he detected pride in her too, bubbling just beneath the surface, Lucia believed in her son. Naruto smiled.

"The Jounin I've assigned to your trip are Hinata Hyuuga, Kiba Inuzuka, and Shino Aburame. They're willing to escort you to and from the bank and protect you if necessary. They'll be here shortly."

"Thank you," she said.

"In the meantime, as promised, I'd like to have another talk."

"You can ask me whatever you like."

He crossed his arms and looked down at the desk, thinking about how to frame what he wanted to say. "Lucia," he said. "I've been giving a lot of thought to what you told Sasuke."

She was a masochist. She had encouraged Itachi Uchiha to hurt her and claimed that he had done so willingly, at least for awhile.

She rested her head in one hand, expression blank.

"I told you I wanted to get to know you better," he said, "not to use against you, but because I want to understand where you are coming from. I also think you should get to know me better. Sasuke too," he added, "and Itachi Uchiha."

She lifted her head. "Itachi Uchiha?"

That caught her interest. He could tell by the light that came into her eyes. A moment ago she had been slightly bored, maybe a little uncomfortable. Now she was alive.

It gave credence to one of his suspicions. He had given this a lot of thought.

"I can't tell you everything I know about him," he said. "There are certain truths that belong to the village, things that outsiders shouldn't know. It would betray the trust of people here to share those things with you. But based on what I know, I have difficulty believing that Itachi would do the things you say he did."

"Well, he did," she said complacently. "What is difficult to believe about a man who murdered his family? Unless he didn't do it?"

"He did," Naruto said.

She shrugged, as if that settled it. "A man like that is capable of anything. And he had a reputation for cruelty. I knew it before I met him."

"Yeah," Naruto agreed. "I know all about that. As a ninja, he was capable of a great cruelty, and he was ruthless in battle. His genjutsu could cripple a man with a look."

"I'd heard that," she said quietly.

"He used genjutsu on you, correct?" Naruto said.

"Do you think that doesn't count?"

"It counts," Naruto replied. "I said myself it could be crippling. I'm just not convinced he really wanted to hurt you."

"If you were there, you wouldn't doubt it."

"How often would you say what he did to you an illusion? Most of the time? All of the time? Some of the time?"

"Almost all of the time," she replied. "Serious acts of violence were always genjutsu anyway, and he was always serious. That's what I wanted. He didn't want to mar my appearance, and it is easier to recover from illusionary pain. Afterward, I would come out of it, and we would do…other things."

Naruto cleared his throat quietly. Was that how she thought of herself? Or how she assumed others thought of her? She was disturbingly accepting about it. He didn't like it.

She seemed to detect that he had reacted negatively to her explanation.

"Why do you find it difficult to believe that he was a sadist?" Lucia asked him. "He was also kind to me, but when he wanted to hurt me, it was very real. I never questioned why he should want to. It seemed obvious to me why he would."

"Why's that?" he asked quietly.

"People become what they do. They mimic what they see and repeat what is done to them. In war, people change. Surely you have witnessed it?"

He had, but he didn't like that either. He wondered what she had witnessed. Maybe not war, but there was something. She was full of secrets. It wouldn't surprise him to learn that much of what she kept locked inside her head was terrible.

Her hands curved over the armrests. She sat straight, expression cold, shoulders back—proud and logical and apathetic. At least on the surface. She closed her eyes and spoke in a calm, clear voice.

"I heard that things have changed since I was here last, but in Itachi's time, Shinobi were trained to do terrible things and feel

nothing. It must have affected everything he did."

"That's true," Naruto said, not without sadness, or curiosity as to why she knew so much. Few people other than Shinobi gave the lives of Shinobi much thought. "At least it used to be. I don't have trouble believing Itachi would find you distracting for all of that. Many ninja would seek solace in a beautiful woman who asked no questions. Why hurt such a woman?"

Lucia closed her eyes. "If she asked him to," she said. Her words were thick. "If she was that selfish. If she encouraged it, it might even make him feel better."

Naruto's hands clenched the desk and grimaced at the floor. Did she think Itachi Uchiha was a person like that?

"I don't want to talk of this anymore," Lucia said.

Naruto was surprised. He caught anguish on her face just before she turned it away from him. He almost blurted out what he was thinking, but thought better of it. Not yet.

They were both silent, mulling over their thoughts. Naruto had so many.

"What kinds of things do you like, Lucia?"

"Things I like?" she asked. "What do you mean?"

He leaned back in his chair. "My favorite food is ramen," he said.

A soft sound escaped her lips like a puff of air. She turned back to face him and leaned her head back on her fist. "I like tea," she said. "Spicy and sweet, served very hot."

"Hmm." He smiled. "Any brothers and sisters?"

"I have an older sister living in the country where I was born."

"Hobbies?"

She smiled. "Not really."

When the escort arrived, Naruto made introductions while watching Lucia out of the corner of his eye. She greeted everyone professionally, much like any client.

Naruto stole a few glances at Hinata, who stood at the end of the line with eyes full of soft light, silent and sure of herself, an unobtrusive but luminescent version of the shy girl she had once been. She flicked him a small smile. He tried to imagine hurting her on purpose, in any capacity, and couldn't.

Once Lucia had gathered her things, the team departed. Naruto was not worried about letting Lucia go to the bank, especially not with Hinata, Kiba, and Shino to watch her. He would learn something about her from her trip. He needed more information.

Naruto remained alone in the office. He turned to look at himself in the small mirror that hung on the side wall opposite from the window.

What caused a person to like pain? Or like causing pain to others? Was it the experience of cruelty? Or, when Lucia was guessing at Itachi's life, was she really reflecting on her own? Had someone done something to her? Someone she loved?

Sakura had called him a masochist once. He lifted his hand and turned it over a few times. There was no scar from the time he had stabbed himself. He had the Nine Tails to thank for that, though he hadn't known at the time that he would heal so quickly. It was the day of his first real mission and he hadn't been feeling too sure of himself. He had wanted to prove himself as a ninja. He had made a vow. He had made a vow of pain not to run away.

Lucia left home, bringing her two children to the land of their father—a dangerous man she had hardly known—and asked Konoha to shelter her from murderous enemies. He didn't think that could be

considered running away, especially considering how unafraid of those enemies she seemed now. Headed outside the safety of the walls for the first time since her arrival, she seemed not the least bit concerned for her welfare.

He frowned at his hand.

She had the air of someone running toward something. Could the masochism be in any way connected? Something she was running from. Something she was running toward. Something she had suffered. Something she wanted.

If pain was connected to her goal, then she had been chasing it for at least as long as she had known Itachi Uchiha. It made him wonder what had she been doing during her visits to the Land of Fire other than sleeping with a rogue Shinobi.

He lowered his hand and looked into his own face, trying to fit the pieces together.

If she had been up to something particular, would Itachi Uchiha have known about it?

TBC

And… Itachi is a Genin. Yay! The plot can thicken.

I've read and tried to edit this so many times, it's all a blur of gibbish!

I hope it was enjoyable. I know the story overall might seem be a bit slow (I am building to something, I swear) or predictable (some parallels are on purpose), and of course it is fanfic, so the Naruto characters are certainly interpreted for the story, but if you are enjoying it please let me know! I really appreciate reviews, so please let me know what you think. Constructive critiques are also welcome (but please say nice things too… :))

Chapter 10

Warnings : This fanfic is for 16+ readers (rated M). It contains sexual references , mature themes (including sado-masochism...described vaguely but not explicitly "shown"), some violence, a very little bit of swearing, and other material. , This fic FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES for this site so please do not report it as MA. There are no explicit sex scenes. All such scenes "cut off" before anything happens. Violence is typical for a story about ninjas. There isn't anything extremely disturbing described in any detail.

White Rain

Chapter 10

By Zapenstap

Lucia opened her eyes to whiteness. It took her a few moments to recognize a pillow beneath her face. With vision having returned, she half-expected to be assaulted next by the sharp scent of pain and blood. But there were no smells except for clean linen, the scent of lavender soap on her skin, the ash in the fire place across the room, and Itachi Uchiha, whose hand she felt on her bare back.

How many hours had passed? The fire had been roaring when they began. It was dying or dead now, a licking flame or two emitting red light that was barely enough to see by. The night was deep. There were no sounds outside the windows.

She stirred, expecting muscles to ache and broken bones to fail, but her body obeyed the commands she gave it. She turned her head on the pillow. The hand on her back shifted when she moved, stroking downwards from her shoulder blades to the small of her back. The touch was gentle, soothing, and patient. Completely different.

She wanted to ask if it was done, but she knew the answer. The mood had changed. She remembered very little except that she had endured after he denied her plea to stop. He must have reached his limit too.

The effects were already fading.

She rolled over, naked on the mattress. The sheets were in a crumple at her feet. She didn't remember at what point her clothes had been stripped from her, or when she had been brought to the bed, but she didn't feel vulnerable in her skin. At nineteen, she had lived too much already to worry about something like that. Besides, the eyes on her were silently appreciative.

" *What time is it?" she asked in a voice hoarse from what was like a drug-induced sleep.*

" *Almost three."*

She sat up, one hand going to her head. Her hair was mussed, a wrecked tangle of curls her fingers couldn't separate. But her skin was unmarred, pale, smooth and unblemished, despite the memory of welts, lashes, and bruises.

Itachi Uchiha sat at the edge of the bed, both feet on the floor, twisted at the waist to face her. He was still dressed, though the cloak with the red clouds was thrown over a chair in the corner of the room. He always removed it afterward, like casting off a personality. His face was expressionless, dark hair tied at the nape of his neck, eyes watching her with the Sharingan that was almost always activated.

The sense of him was different. From the way she felt before compared to now, he might as well have been a different person.

She brought her legs around and turned toward him so that they were sitting side by side. His eyes traveled absently over her body when she moved, from her calves to her stomach, to her breasts, to

her neck, to her face. Even without expression, she knew what he was thinking. It was in his eyes. It was in his throat when he swallowed. He reacted when she brought her knees up under her, leaned toward him on the mattress, and touched his face where his jaw met his neck.

She noted the minute changes in his expression that processed her touch. He wouldn't encourage her, so she didn't waste time waiting. She unbuttoned the wide collar of his shirt. Her fingers grazed his neck, brushed across his clavicle, and slid under his shirt to reach his bare shoulders. She caught his gaze, saw his breathing hitch, and reached further down his back. He closed his eyes. Wrapping her other hand around the back of his neck, she pulled herself close to him. The muscles in his arms tightened. His breathing became a little heavier as her proximity caused her breasts to press against his arm. Leaning forward, she touched her lips lightly against his neck.

His speed and strength surprised her. In one motion, he lifted her and swung her onto his lap so that her knees were straddling his hips. He kept his eyes on her face as he pulled her up against him. She gasped, heart racing, as she felt his body against hers. She tugged at the bottom of his shirt, lifting it over his head, revealing skin that was lightly tanned and softly golden in the dim light shed by the embers in the dying fire. She ran her hands over it. His muscles were hard beneath her fingers. God, he was beautifully made. She leaned in to kiss him.

He didn't let her. He flipped her on her back, her legs still around his hips, and pushed her into the pillows. There were a few intoxicating moments where his body pressed against hers before he removed the rest of his clothes. When he was fully undressed, his mouth found her neck and then her chin, and finally her mouth, tentative at first, then increasingly urgent and insistent. His breath was warm. His skin was smooth. The connection was hot, and slick, and dizzying.

She wanted to please him. She was half crazed with the need for pleasure after so much anguish and helplessness. She whispered

her desires into his ear, half pliant, half aggressive, and then questioned over and over between kisses, 'What do you want? What do you want? What do you want?'

"Lucia."

Someone was shaking her awake.

Lucia opened her eyes and looked up into the visage of one of her Shinobi escorts. His eyes were hidden by tinted glasses and a collar had been drawn up around the lower half of his face.

She lifted her head off of the hard pillow. Her mouth was dry. They had spent the night in a hostel between Konoha village and their destination. Her muscles were sore.

"Did I say something in my sleep?" she asked.

"No. The sun is up. We'll reach town today."

The sun was up already? She sat up wearily. She couldn't remember what she had been dreaming, only that she hadn't wanted to wake.

Hinata's eyes never left Lucia Van Alstyne.

She had been a closed person throughout the entire trip, though unfailingly polite. She deferred to the Jounin on all matters involving travel, safety precautions, and accommodations. She said very little that was not a comment directly related to the circumstances of the moment. She seemed entirely at ease under their protection.

At least, that's how it was until they arrived in the city. The change was subtle, but there was a definite change. As soon as they passed through the gates, Lucia became more alert. She did not seem frightened, though. What Hinata noticed was an intense glittering in her eyes, and aloofness in the way she watched everything around

her, especially the people, as if seeing them from a great distance. She seemed to be thinking constantly and quickly.

When they arrived at the bank, Lucia was asked to wait outside with Kiba and Akamaru while Shino and Hinata checked the interior of the lobby for any possible danger. With her Byakugan activated, Hinata swept every person and object in the room, finding nothing of consequence. At Shino's direction, Kiba escorted Lucia inside, leaving Akamaru outside to scout the streets.

The bank was a spacious and beautiful building with marble floors, wide walkways, tall dark-wood desks, and vaulted ceilings. Men and women crossed constantly through the lobby.

"Wait here," Lucia told them. They nodded and allowed her to proceed.

Kiba moved to stand on Hinata's left. Shino stood beside Kiba. Between the three of them, every observatory sense was on alert.

"I've put a bug on her," Shino murmured into the collar of his jacket. "Just in case."

Lucia walked up to the first available teller, calmly gave her name, and asked to make a withdrawal.

Other customers were trying to avoid staring at the three Shinobi standing shoulder to shoulder along the back wall, but everyone looked. Hinata supposed ninja must come in periodically as guards, enough to avoid comment, but perhaps not often enough to be unworthy of circumspect stares. It was clear they were making the patrons nervous with their presence. The staff didn't know whether to smile or frown at them.

Lucia seemed oblivious to all of the questioning looks.

"She doesn't smell nervous," Kiba said. "Calm as a cucumber."

"I think the expression is 'cool as a cucumber,'" Shino informed him.

Kiba's face reddened.

Hinata held back a smile.

The teller behind the counter spent a few moments searching through some files, stopped when she found the one she was looking for, and immediately sought a manager for assistance.

A man in a suit replaced the teller at the counter. He was an established man in his fifties or sixties with a wide jaw and graying hair. Hinata could tell that he recognized Lucia on sight by his facial expressions. He seemed surprised to see her, but less surprised than Hinata might have guessed. He smiled. Hinata read his lips.

"Miss Van Alstyne," he murmured. "I wondered when I would see you."

"Were you aware I was in town?" she asked.

The manager cleared his throat. "Pardon. Your husband was here last week. I thought you were here together. He brought Shinobi with him too. A different village, though, now that I think about it."

Kiba muttered something under his breath about it being a good thing to send escorts. Hinata agreed but didn't say anything. She hoped none of this would lead to unnecessary fighting.

"I see," Lucia replied. She still did not look frightened. She didn't even seem surprised. "Are my accounts in order? He was not allowed to access them, I trust."

"Everything is as you left it," the manager assured her.

"Did Gehard ask about me?" Lucia queried.

"He wanted to know if you had been in. I told him I haven't seen your face in eleven years, but that I was pleased to hear you had returned

and looked forward to seeing you. It is rumored he has left the country actually, but the Shinobi that were with him have been seen lingering in the city."

Lucia nodded as if that was exactly what she expected to hear.

"Would you like to sit?" the bank manager asked her. He gestured to one of the private offices behind closed doors. Beside Hinata, Kiba tensed slightly.

"Yes," Lucia replied, "but in the open, where my guard can observe me."

The bank manager's eyes flickered to Hinata, Kiba, and Shino. "Of course," he said, and led Lucia to a pair of comfortable chairs laid out on either side of a desk by a window in the lobby.

"Is she trying to make this easy on us, or does she think she will need us for her protection?" Kiba muttered.

Hinata didn't answer. She didn't know.

"Ex…Excuse me. Um, would any of you like something to drink? Tea? Coffee? Ice water?"

Hinata blinked. The three of them turned their heads to look at one of the bank's employees, a woman with short red hair who approached them from the other side of the room and was smiling at them nervously.

"You may sit while you wait if you like," she said, gesturing to a pair of couches pushed up under a window around twenty feet from where Lucia was just now sitting across from the bank manager. They should easily be able to see and hear Lucia from the location, without looking like hawks. Perhaps the staff wanted them to sit in order to make them less conspicuous.

Kiba and Hinata exchanged glances. Kiba shrugged.

"I would not mind reclining," Shino answered.

They followed the staff member to the couches and were offered glasses of ice cold water.

"Pretty friendly here," Kiba muttered when the woman had left.

Hinata kept her eyes on Lucia, even as she sipped her water.

"I am here to make a withdrawal," Lucia informed the bank manager as settled herself across from him.

The bank manager did not obviously react to this announcement, but Hinata noted a slight tick in his face. He watched impassively as Lucia bent over a slip of paper and scribbled on the surface.

"She makes him nervous," Hinata informed the others. "He tensed a little."

Kiba and Shino didn't say anything.

"In this amount," Lucia murmured, sliding the paper across the table, "if you would be so kind."

The bank manager turned the piece of paper over. Hinata had watched the pen strokes closely from a distance. It was a number, and the figure was substantial. Lucia would be able to live comfortably on such a sum in Konoha for several months. She repeated the figure quietly to Kiba.

"I thought she told Naruto it was a small account?" Kiba muttered.

"Been there ten years," Shino informed him, "quietly compounding interest."

Kiba frowned. "Did she know she was going to leave her husband ten years ago?"

Hinata didn't know, but she wondered too.

The bank manager waved one of the other staff members to his and Lucia's side and made a request in a whisper that Hinata could not see as the employee's head was blocking her view. The man the manager summoned seemed to understand. As he left to fulfill the request, Lucia and the manager engaged in small talk about the weather and health of each other's families. After a few minutes, the employee returned with a locked suitcase and a key that dangled from a bracelet. He presented both to the manager and departed.

"Your Shinobi guards will see you safely to your next destination, I assume?" the bank manager asked Lucia as he handed her the key. "If not, we will call someone to escort you. You shouldn't travel alone."

"I am well protected, thank you," Lucia told him. She put the bracelet on her wrist and covered it with her sleeve.

"Will there be anything else, Miss Van Alstyne?" the bank manager asked her.

"Not today," she replied.

"A pleasure doing business with you."

Hinata set down her glass and rose along with Kiba and Shino to join Lucia as she took the suitcase from the table. Lucia surrendered the locked suitcase to Shino without a fuss, who tucked it under one arm without comment. Hinata did not find it remarkable, as clients typically allowed Shinobi to carry valuables provided they were well-paid and could be trusted. As a group, the three of them escorted Lucia out of the bank and into the busy city streets.

Akamaru was waiting for them outside. The enormous white dog rose to his feet and barked once at Kiba when they emerged.

"Anything suspicious?" Shino asked Kiba.

"Nope," Kiba said, scratching the dog's head. "Akamaru didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. So far so good."

"Wonderful," Lucia murmured. There was vibrancy in her voice. She seemed in a good mood. The sharpness Hinata had noted in her earlier seemed to be gone. "Let's go to lunch. My treat."

Shino and Kiba exchanged startled glances.

"That's very kind of you," Hinata said. "It is not customary."

"I think it wise to treat well the people you trust with your life," Lucia told them. "And now I can afford it. It is no trouble."

Lucia's choice was a high-end restaurant at the edge of town. She rented a private room with silk curtains and a scenic view of the entire city. They were served four courses. Hinata was tentatively digging into some kind of foreign, crusted custard dessert that smelled deliciously sweet when Kiba spoke.

"This might be the best mission ever," Kiba announced. "I don't usually enjoy city missions, but I don't usually eat this good either. And so far, no fighting,"

"I'm glad," Lucia replied.

Shino alone did not eat much, as he had particular dietary requirements, but he was eyeing the custard with his arms crossed as if deciding it might be worth a slip. "Would it have been wise to request that the bank manager not mention that you came here?" he asked Lucia.

"I didn't want to involve him," Lucia replied, sipping expensive sake from a porcelain cup. "If anyone else should ask about me, it is better that he just tell the truth."

"Do you think anyone will come asking?" Kiba asked.

"Yes, I do," Lucia replied. "Probably have been asking every day. Gehard will learn that I came to town with Shinobi escorts from the Leaf Village. It is only a matter of time before he knows I am staying in Konoha."

"But the bank manager said he has left the country," Hinata said.

"If that's actually true, he will return," Lucia replied. "The news that I am staying in Konoha itself will hopefully dissuade him from any thought of having me attacked, but he won't give up so easily."

"No Shinobi escort group would attack Konoha," Shino said. "It is ludicrous to suggest it."

"Shino's right," Kiba agreed. "Besides which, you're under the personal protection of the Hokage. There are few Shinobi out there who would make an attempt on your life if they know that."

Lucia set down her cup. "You have a lot of respect for your Hokage. All three of you. He is near your age, very young to be such a revered leader."

"He's earned it," Kiba said.

"I heard about him before I came here," Lucia confessed. "Naruto Uzumaki, Konoha's youngest Hokage. I have heard that he has had a very tangible impact on how Shinobi operate. He has made alliances between Shinobi villages stronger than any of his predecessors, and contributed greatly to the stability between countries in this region. To do so much so young is no easy task."

"But you don't trust him," Kiba said.

"I don't know him. But I do think he is interesting. He has been kind to me so far."

"Naruto is very strong," Hinata told her, "and intuitive. When he puts his mind to it, he is very good at understanding people. He is an

insightful person. I'm sure you can trust his kindness. "

"You're his lover, are you not?" Lucia asked.

Hinata felt heat rise in her face. She could feel it radiating from her cheeks and forehead, prickling the skin. That she would say something so frankly-!

Kiba laughed loudly. Shino remained silent, still studying his dessert.

"Forgive me," Lucia said to her. "I did not mean to make you uncomfortable. I can see you are a private person. It was merely an observation. When you are in the same room together, his affection for you becomes apparent."

Hinata looked down at her hands, still blushing. She allowed herself to think of her relationship with Naruto without embarrassment. Yes, they were lovers, very tender lovers, still discovering something new each day, and very lucky, she felt. "Yes," she said. "But my opinion is not swayed by that. I admired Naruto greatly before he noticed me, and for many years before he was Hokage. I have always thought that he was kind. He is someone to trust."

Lucia didn't say anything for several moments. At length she replied: "That must be a wonderful feeling."

Itachi had to drag himself home. It was his fourth day of 'missions' as a Genin.

Free labor was more like it. In four days he had weeded two gardens, painted one fence, cleaned two walkways, and babysat several pet animals. It was not at all what he imagined he'd be doing as a ninja. Of course, there were lots of good things about it. For one thing, he was building muscle and endurance from the endless lifting, running, painting, and cleaning. He was also getting to know some of the ordinary people in the village.

More importantly, he was bonding with his teammates. Because of that, the past few days were his happiest since he arrived in the village. He had friends again. They felt like friends now that he and Amaya and Haro were working together and training together. Haro even started helping Itachi with his taijutsu. He ended up face down on the ground half the time, but he was seeing improvement in his skills.

And today, Sakura started them on genjutsu. She didn't explain why she started with that, but Itachi expected it was because of him, because he had asked to learn something he might be good at. All they had done so far was learn how to recognize whether or not they or a teammate was trapped in an illusion and practice getting one another out of it. Itachi's was sore from how many times he had been smacked in the head. Coming out of a genjutsu was a lot like waking up from a dream with a headache.

By the time Itachi reached home, he was thinking how much he'd like to get some real sleep.

Rina was sitting out on the porch step. As he got closer, he could see leaves and stems and discarded flowers strewn about her feet and scattered across the porch. A small bouquet of yellow, pink, and white flowers with rich green leaves lay bundled in her lap. Rina was picking pieces out of the bouquet and rearranging the flowers into some kind of order, the significance of which escaped him.

"Hi," she greeted him. "Catch a cat today?"

He gave her a rueful smile. She had been less than impressed with his missions so far.

"Cleared some bird nests out of a chimney this morning," he told her. "Practiced genjutsu this afternoon." He leaned over the rail beside her so as not to step on her work. "What are you doing? Did you pick those after school? Are they for someone?"

"Part of school," she said. "They separated the boys and girls today. Ino came to our class and taught us about flowers."

Flowers? This was what he had missed in Academy? He tried not to make a face. "Why?"

Perhaps sensing his derision, she made him wait until she had finished arranging the bouquet, tied it with ribbon, and presented the finished product. "What do you think?" she asked.

"It's pretty. Why did you learn about flowers?"

"Flowers have a language," Rina told him. "You can send messages in them."

"Like how red roses are supposed to be for love?"

"It gets more complicated."

"What does your bouquet say?"

"Well, this one is simple. It says 'be happy'," She smiled at him. "These flowers are for cheer," she explained, pointing at the star-shaped yellow ones. "These are for peace." She pointed to some white ones clustered like tiny bells around a dark green stem. "And these are for beauty." The pink ones were large with soft, round petals. "Ino says a clean message is best. She told me that this bouquet will help someone remember beautiful things. It is to make someone who is sad feel better."

"And who did you make it for?"

"Mom," she replied, lowering her eyes and setting the bouquet on her knees. "For when she gets back."

He nodded. There was no need to say anything about that. They both understood.

Itachi reflected that Rina's lesson was convenient, as Ino and Choji were checking up on them every day until their mother returned from her trip. Ino owned a flower shop, and Rina was supposed to go there after school if Itachi wasn't home yet, so the materials were accessible.

Their mother was supposed to return today, but there had been no sign of her yet. There was still a good amount of light to see by so it could still happen. Waiting made him nervous, but he told himself he wasn't going to worry.

"Let's eat dinner," he suggested, pushing away from the railing. "You put those in some water and I'll help you clean up."

After cleaning the porch, he made Rina and himself dinner with what they hand, which was plenty since Choji had made sure their pantry was stocked with more than both of them together could eat in a month.

After dinner, while he was clearing the table, Rina brought her music portfolio downstairs and sat down to work on it.

"Don't you have any other schoolwork?" he asked her.

She didn't look up. "I finished it in class." She worked in silence for a few minutes, and then sighed audibly.

"What?" he asked. "Stuck?"

She laid her head down on the paper and nodded on the table. "I don't know what to write about in this part."

Her piece was instrumental. Rina's Conservatory teachers back home required that her competition piece had to be about something. She had written a paper on the subject and submitted it to a review months before she had composed anything, which was how she had been chosen to present on tour. She wouldn't let him read the paper so he didn't know what it was supposed to be about.

She was selective about what she showed him ever since he had teased her about writing poetry to Anton Landseer, whose talent with the guitar was apparently something to scream about. She had yet to forgive him.

He was secretly very proud of her. Rina had been selected to tour with Landseer and a small group of other prodigies, something she had been glowing about for weeks before they suddenly had to leave. She'd probably been replaced by someone else by now. He had to admire her for wanting to finish the piece anyway, even though it seemed clear now that they weren't going to go back and she wouldn't get a chance to present it—not the way she intended anyway. He hoped she would get the chance to play it in some other venue.

"You want me to help you?" he asked her.

She nodded and made room for him at the table.

He wasn't sure how much help he would be, but he sat down beside her and thumbed through the sheets, reading up and down the staff lines. He was good at counting and rhythm, but it was hard for him to sound out a melody without hearing it played, and he wasn't much of a composer. Rina could look at notes and just sing it, or hum it, or play it. She could also do it backwards. When composing, she said she usually felt something first, and played what she felt.

"Uh, okay," he said. "I don't know what you intended, but this part right here looks a little crowded. I think you have an extra pick-up."

She erased part of the stanza, thought for a moment, and penciled the notes back in a little differently. He counted the beats according to what she had written for the time and nodded.

"Okay. So the next part is where you're stuck, right?"

She nodded mutely.

While he was thinking, the door opened behind them.

"Mom!" Rina bounded off her chair, composition forgotten.

Their mother looked a little tired, her face flushed and glowing from sun and exertion, as if she had been on vacation. She was carrying bags full of packages, which she set hurriedly down on the floor in front of the window to prepare for Rina's fast hug. Rina was squealing before Itachi had a chance to even stand and greet her.

"Itachi made Genin!" Rina exclaimed.

"So I heard," their mother murmured. Her eyes sparkled when she looked at him over Rina's head. "Congratulations."

He couldn't help smiling.

"I'm sorry it took me so long," she added. "I did some shopping on the way home."

It relieved him to know why she had returned so late in the day, but shopping wasn't what most interested Itachi. "Did you see Gehard?" he asked her.

"No," she said. "It seems he followed me here, but I was informed he has gone back home."

Itachi felt tension drain out of him. "He's given up?"

"Well," she murmured. "We'll see about that."

Rina was snooping in the shopping bags. She let out a shout of excitement that broke Itachi's concentration.

"Presents! Are these for me and Itachi?"

"Of course."

From the bag she withdrew boxes and packages wrapped in paper and tissue, each with a tiny tag reading either his name or hers. She gathered the ones with her name and hesitated, looking to their mother for approval, hands fidgeting. Rina loved presents. Itachi laughed. When his mother nodded assent, Rina rip apart the packaging.

Itachi was startled by the contents, and craned his neck to see better. It wasn't souvenirs as he had expected. It was…

Rina was struggling to pull wrist guards onto her hands. They were midnight blue, covered her palms with thick, padded cloth, and ran all the way up to her elbows. There were open-toed cleats in the box, which she immediately put on her feet. The parcels wrapped in tissue paper contained skin-tight black leggings cut short to the knee, a charcoal gray flap skirt, and a blue v-neck shirt with black mesh around the neck and short, arm-hugging sleeves.

Shinobi combat clothes. Everything was brand new. It was all top of the line. It was all the height of fashion. Gathering her goods into a pile, Rina kissed their mother on the cheek and ran with the gifts up to her room.

Itachi just stared as his mother handed him a stack of similar boxes.

"Congratulations again," she told him. "And happy early birthday."

Itachi took the boxes to his room and immediately put everything on. The pants were black. The cleats were blue. The shirt was dark blue like Rina's, and crossed with a layer of black mesh. There was a jacket too, made from some kind of tough material, also black, with pockets and steel gray buckles on the sleeves and a wide collar with snaps that ran up one side. He could pull it up around his face or unsnap it and fold it around her shoulders. He did this a couple of times and then re-tied the Konoha headband around his forehead.

One of the smaller boxes held dark blue gloves. They were fingerless with thin metal plates woven into the material over the

palm—the plates could be removed by undoing a buckle and unwrapping part of the glove. There was also an armguard. It took Itachi a few minutes to figure out how to strap it on to his left forearm. It was made of metal and black leather. There were several slots along the outside, used for catching a blade and disarming an opponent using a katana, sword, or long knife.

When he had all the pieces precisely arranged, he turned and looked at himself in the mirror. The transformation was astonishing. He looked like a real ninja. The effect was so severe, he made faces at himself until a knock sounded at his door.

"Come in," he said.

It was Rina. She peeked inside. "You look scary!" she exclaimed.

He smiled at her. "You look cute."

She pranced all the way in and did a turn. Her outfit was definitely cute. He had a feeling that his mother shopped for Rina that way intentionally. Of course, all the pieces were functional, but it was still very, very cute.

He removed the arm guard because it was a little heavy, and tossed it on the bed, but left everything else on.

They went downstairs together. Their mom was reclining at the table, a cup of warm tea clasped between both hands. She lifted her head and appraised them both.

"You look adorable," she told Rina. To him she said: "You look even more like your father." Her expression twisted slightly. "Especially the colors. I don't know if I did that subconsciously or accidentally."

He mulled that over, and was struck by a sudden idea. "Mom, can I go out?"

"Where?"

"I want to see Sasuke. Now that I'm a Genin, I'd like to talk to him."

He knew from the length of time she paused that she didn't like the idea, but she wasn't going to tell him he couldn't go.

"We've never really had a conversation," he added.

"Don't stay out too late," she said. "And don't overstay your welcome. If he doesn't want to talk to you, come straight home."

He nodded. "I won't stay at all. I just have something I'd like to ask."

He turned to the door. Rina followed on his heels, as if attached to him by a string.

"Where are you going?" his mother demanded.

"With Itachi," she answered. "I want to see Sasuke too. Is that okay?"

Itachi paused with his hand on the door handle. He wasn't sure Rina should come along actually, but he didn't see what right he had to stop her, so when his mother just nodded, he held the door open and let her duck under his arm. He wasn't sure she wanted to see Sasuke so much as she wanted to be a witness.

They made their way across the village mostly in silence, the sun beginning to set at their backs. For several blocks, Rina half chased her shadow, skipping, hopping, and turning, admiring the outline of her new clothes.

Itachi walked with his head half down, thinking about what he was going to say, and what he would do depending on the response he was given. He took deep breaths.

At length, Rina wound down and fell in beside him. She matched her stride to his, which forced her to take large steps. He unconsciously shortened his so she could keep up.

"Are you going to ask him to train you?" Rina asked him.

Itachi expelled the breath he was holding. "I'm going to ask him what he *thinks* about training me."

"He doesn't like us," she said. She looked straight ahead when she said this, her dark eyes very serious.

"It's not that he doesn't like us," Itachi informed her. "The Hokage told me. It's difficult for Sasuke to accept us because his brother killed his family. In his mind, we're not supposed to exist. And I guess that growing up he really loved his brother, so that makes it harder. It doesn't help that mom is... like she is. But I asked Sakura about it, and she seemed to think that maybe he would be open to the idea if I approach it the right way."

Rina was very quiet, absorbing all he said without turning her head.

Itachi knew exactly where Sasuke lived. He and Sakura had a place together. He had taken trouble to avoid it since to moving to the village, sometimes cutting wide swaths around the outer streets to make sure he didn't accidentally run into his uncle unannounced.

Overall, he wasn't sure how he felt about Sasuke. He wasn't sure at all how this would go.

They turned a corner and approached the house more or less in stride. It was located at the end of a quiet street, shaded by trees on the left side. A porch wrapped cozily around the right side. Through a window in the front, Itachi saw the flash of Sakura's hair. She looked up and saw him. He thought he saw her smile before she turned her head and disappeared from view. Presumably, she had gone to inform Sasuke.

Itachi stopped several feet away from the house. Now he was feeling nervous. He could feel his muscles quietly shaking under his clothes. Rina stood on his left with her arms clasped behind her back. They waited side by side until the door opened.

Sasuke emerged from the interior of the house with his Sharingan was activated. Itachi swallowed, feeling his muscles lock up as that red-eyed gaze threatened to knock him flat from ten paces distant. His uncle stepped out on the porch, sweeping him and his sister head to toe in one glance.

"What do you want?" Sasuke asked. If a stone could talk, it would sound something like that. The severity took Itachi aback.

"I have something to ask you."

He hadn't expected his uncle to be happy to see him, but he had expected a slightly warmer reception than this. Sasuke's face was like a sculpture carved from ice. It wasn't natural. Itachi fought to understand. It reminded him a little of the way he stiffened up when he was angry or scared and was pretending not to be. Itachi wondered abstractedly what colossal emotion his uncle was trying to avoid feeling to look and sound the way he did.

"I don't mean to bother you," Itachi said. "It's just…I think maybe we got off on the wrong foot. I..I'd like to get to know you. "

Sasuke's face did not change. "You want me to train you," he said. He stepped down from the porch and strode toward them.

Itachi took half a step back. Sasuke walked right up to him and looked into his face. The Sharingan eyes caught his and held him motionless. They were mesmerizing. They seemed to be trying to rip his thoughts and feelings right out of his head.

"You think because you are now a Genin, that I will train you, because we are related."

Itachi struggled to speak. He did think that. Could a Sharingan read someone's thoughts?

"We are related," Sasuke said, "but we aren't family. No matter your lineage, you aren't an Uchiha."

Itachi swallowed. "If I have a Sharingan—"

"Better for you if you don't. If you do, leave it buried. Forget about it."

Itachi didn't understand. Did Sasuke just not want him to be blessed by something so precious to his family? That would make sense, but then why would it *better* for him not to have one? Such an edict went against everything he had been told. Everyone kept asking him about whether or not he had a Sharingan. By everything he had heard about it, it was an incredible gift.

"I don't understand."

Sasuke straightened and turned his face away, staring at the mountains rising around the village. "The Uchiha Clan is cursed," he said. "It doesn't need new members. It would be better for its accursed history to die with me."

Sakura walked out onto the porch. She was staring at Sasuke with a stricken expression. Her shock was so profound, it shook Itachi out of his petrified state.

"Cursed? What do you mean?" he demanded. "I thought the Uchiha were supposed to be a great clan."

"Ah," Sasuke agreed. "They were great—Greatly feared, both by other ninja, and their own members."

Itachi felt his stomach clench. He experienced a flash of intuitive understanding. Family members that couldn't trust each other. Family members that hurt each other. Family members that killed each other. He understood, but his imagination refused to accept it.

Sasuke didn't allow him to remain ignorant. He leaned close. His words poured into Itachi ears like ice and darkness. "The Uchiha Clan thrived on greed, hate, and vengeance. It was tradition for members to betray and murder each other, even their closest

friends, even their own families, for power. By this method, the Sharingan can be greatly enhanced."

Vague images sprang up in Itachi's mind. "I—"

Sasuke's pulled back. His face was hard, bleak, and certain. "That is why it is better if you don't have one." Without saying anything further, he turned and walked back toward the house.

Words struggled to break free from Itachi's throat, but were caught and stifled by the dryness in his mouth. Sakura stood like a statue on the porch.

Itachi felt Rina clasp his hand, her small fingers slipping into his palm.

"I don't care about that!" Itachi shouted.

Sasuke mounted the steps and stopped, turning back to look at him.

"I came here because I want to know what my father was like," Itachi said. "That's all. I don't care about all that power stuff. You knew him best. Maybe things were bad. Maybe they were really bad, but Naruto said you were close once. I'm sure there were some things about him that were good. My mother must have seen something, so I thought…"

"Your mother?" Sasuke said contemptuously. "Something good?"

Itachi shrugged that off. He didn't know her. He was used to people making statements like that. But he knew that his mother, whatever her faults, was very particular.

"Anything you could tell me. It can't be all terrible—"

"It is terrible," Sasuke replied. "And what your mother did? You should know I consider it an offense. You should never have been born."

Itachi didn't know what to say. His mother again. Always it came back to her. Her passions. Her selfishness. Her calculations. The things she did and never explained. Why was it always her? He had wanted so much for Sasuke to see the good parts of his brother in him, anything he had liked once, something worth instructing…

It was as if Sasuke could read his mind.

"Do you think you can replace him?" Sasuke asked, "Maybe you thought that if you came here looking like a Shinobi I might think of you as a second chance, that it can all be done over? Something like that is not possible. I don't want to replace Itachi. And I won't train you."

Itachi's eyes felt hot.

"If you got to know me—"

"I don't want to know you."

"Why not?"

But Sasuke didn't answer. Instead, Itachi felt a change, like a ripple in the air. It was so smooth, he might have thought he imagined it, if not for all the practice he'd had a few hours ago. One second he was staring at Sasuke, while behind him, Sakura's expression was firming into hard anger. The next, Sasuke and Sakura were both gone. His hand was empty. He turned his head, but Rina was gone too.

"This is…" he said to himself, looking around, at once confused and yet feeling he knew the answer a second ago, if only he could remember it.

He turned to look back at the porch.

There was a man standing there. It wasn't Sasuke, but a resemblance was striking. Even more striking was how much the

man resembled Itachi's own reflection. The man was wearing black pants and a black shirt with a wide collar. He wore light armor over the shirt, and arm guards on both forearms. He carried a sword in one hand. He stood completely motionless, hair tied behind his neck. He was young, maybe a handful of years older than himself, but his face was the face of someone who had lived lifetimes compacted into incremental moments. He stared at Itachi with crimson, Sharingan eyes.

Itachi couldn't speak. He didn't know what address to use for starters, and he had no idea what to say.

This is impossible . This can't be real.

It had to be a—

Genjutsu

If he could disrupt the chakra flow…

But a part of him didn't want to.

"Are you my father?"

The apparition smiled, but not in a way that was pleasant. Itachi noticed something else then. He felt his heart race. The sword clutched in Itachi Uchiha's hand was dripping blood. And there were shapes behind his heels. It took him a few seconds to realize they were bodies. Itachi didn't recognize them, but he felt sure they were his grandparents.

Before he could think or speak, the image of his father shimmered and changed.

The armor and sword vanished. The bodies behind him were gone. The face that stared into his was still that of Itachi Uchiha, but now it was ashen, like a corpse. Blood trailed from both sides of his mouth. The flesh on the left arm was bloodied and burnt. The eyes were no

longer red. They weren't even black. The corneas seemed to have torn themselves apart. A chalky film the color of milk flooded the area where the pupils and irises used to be.

Itachi felt sick. He turned his head away, and saw Sasuke, standing a few feet behind his left shoulder. The expression on his face was so bleak it hurt the eyes.

There was a thump.

Itachi turned back. His father's body was on the ground, face up, staring blindly into a sky that was dark with rumbling clouds. Somewhere, he thought he heard someone crying, but he didn't know who it was. Then, as he watched, the body on the ground turned black, rippled and shattered into a mass of crows.

They dove straight at him. Instinctively, he dropped to his knees and covered his face with his arms.

"Itachi!"

It was Rina's voice, screaming in his ear.

He looked up, dazzled by the dying light of day.

He was kneeling on the ground. Rina was shaking his arm, her face a mess of fright.

"I'm okay," he assured her, blinking as he reoriented himself with what he hoped was reality. "It was just a genjutsu. What happened?"

Rina pointed to the porch.

Itachi looked. It was immediately obvious what had happened. Sasuke was standing still, his head turned aside. The left side of his face was turning an ugly shade of green. Sakura stood beside him, her fist glowing with tightly controlled chakra, but shaking so badly it was difficult to tell whether she was going to hit him again or collapse where she stood. Her expression was a cascading tumble of

emotions-rage, pain, misery. Sasuke didn't speak. His expression was hidden by his hair, but the feeling that came from him was deadness. Motionlessness. He just stood there while she shouted at him.

"How could you? How could you?" Sakura was screaming, over and over.

Itachi got slowly to his feet. "Let's go," he said to Rina.

His legs almost didn't want to support him, but he forced himself to move, to retreat with Rina back up the street and away from the house surrounded by trees and tweeting birds and the light of a golden sunset. It didn't seem cozy anymore. He wanted to get away.

"What did he do?" Rina gasped as soon as they were out of earshot.

"He showed me my father. I think—" Itachi began. "I think Sasuke killed him."

Rina's eyes widened.

He stopped in the middle of the street and stared down at the ground, trying to process what he had seen and felt. Had Sasuke killed his brother? Maybe it wasn't just a dream. Maybe what he had seen were Sasuke's memories. Sasuke spoke as if he had nothing but hate for his family, and his brother especially, and certainly he had reason, but the look on his face…

Itachi shook his head. Without anymore thought, he broke into a run.

He ran all the way home. Rina followed behind him, screaming at him to slow down. But he didn't. He didn't want her to catch him this time.

He broke through his front door and slammed his hands down on the table where his mother was still nursing her tea. She looked up at him, a startled expression on her face.

"Are you all right?"

"He hates me," he seethed.

She rose from her chair. Itachi backed up, glaring at her.

"He doesn't hate you," she told him. "If anything, he hates me."

"No, he hates that I'm alive. He said so. And I don't even know why I *care* so much. It's just—Ugh!"

"Itachi." Her tone was sad. Sad for him, he knew. He struggled to voice his real feelings to her. He wanted to scream a little. He wanted to ask her about his father. He wanted her to tell him why. What had kept her with such a man? But he couldn't. He was conditioned to speaking carefully. But he hated having to defend her all the time. He hated that he couldn't separate himself from her and the things she did. He wanted to blame her, but he couldn't.

"Did you have to *name* me after him?" he forced out.

"I wanted to."

"Sasuke told me the Uchiha are cursed, that they betrayed and killed each other for power."

"I don't know about that. I'm sorry."

"And my father was the worst of all. He killed everyone. And Sasuke killed him. Did you know that?"

Her face was stricken. Maybe she hadn't known.

"He wishes I was never born! He can't stand the sight of me. He doesn't want to train me, not ever. He thinks I'm cursed."

"You are not cursed."

He forced himself to calm down. His eyes were still hot, but he refused to rub them. Stupid hormones.

His mother spoke to him in a slow, certain tone. "I wanted you more than anything," she told him. "I love you more than anything."

He nodded, looking down at the floor. His breathing slowed down.

Behind him, the door opened. Rina gave him a reproachful look as she came inside. Without a word, she picked up her composition and her flowers from the table and went upstairs.

Itachi took a deep breath and turned back to his mother. "I want to find my team," he told her. "Is it okay if I'm out late?"

His mother nodded. She seemed to understand. He didn't want to be home. He didn't want to be thinking. He would rather be with friends. He'd like to be fighting. Haro would be up for it. Amaya would come too.

He went upstairs to his room for his arm guard as well as the kunai knives and shuriken and other tools his mother had bought for him. When he was all prepared, he left his room and knocked on his sister's door.

"Rina?"

She didn't answer.

"I'm sorry for running ahead of you. I know you are mad at me. If you like, I'll help you work on your composition more tomorrow."

She still didn't answer. She was probably nursing her anger. She was emotional and had a tendency to sulk when she was upset. She would be more amendable tomorrow. She was probably tired too.

He left her door and went back downstairs. His mother watched as he let himself out.

The day had turned to night. The air was crisp and cold. The chirping of bugs had replaced the tweeting of birds. He winnowed his way through the streets to Haro's house, hurrying so he wouldn't think so much. The windows in Haro's home were full of light. He could hear many voices inside the house. Half of them seemed to be yelling, but he couldn't tell if it was angry yelling or just loud talking. He hesitated before knocking on the door.

Haro himself flung it open. "WHAT? Oh, it's you. Hey. What do you want?"

Someone shouted something in the background. Color suffused Haro's face, reddening his neck down to his collar. He turned and screamed over his shoulder.

"I said I would do it!" Haro yelled back. "If I say I'll do it, I'll do it! You don't have to keep asking!"

He turned back to Itachi.

"Uh," Itachi said. He struggled internally with what to say. He didn't want to mention Sasuke or say he was upset or indicate just how much he wanted to hit something. "Is your family having a fight?"

"Huh? Oh. Nah," Haro said. He peered closer at Itachi, blinked, and pulled the door open wider. Yellow light spilled out onto the porch. "Hey! You look great! Did you get new clothes?"

"Yeah," Itachi said, brightening immediately. He had almost forgotten.

"Well, geez, they're great. We should try them out. " He turned over his shoulder again and shouted in a voice that would have carried half a mile. "I'm going out to train! I'll be back later!"

Voices came back at him, still sounding like yelling to Itachi, but Haro seemed unperturbed as he shut the door.

"Is your family mad at you?" Itachi asked.

"No. They're just loud. My brothers want me to help fit the new windows we just got."

"Oh."

"Let's get Amaya," Haro suggested.

Amaya's house was as dark as Haro's was bright. Itachi worried that she may have gone to bed, but Haro didn't think so. They knocked on the door and only waited seconds before Amaya answered it. Behind her, the house was not only dark, but dead silent.

"Up for some night training?" Haro asked her.

"What's the occasion?"

"Itachi got new clothes."

Amaya looked at Itachi and beamed. "They're great!" she exclaimed, and then said, "yeah, let's go. I need night practice."

As they headed for the training grounds, it occurred to Itachi that Amaya didn't ask permission to go anywhere or even mention that she was going out. He asked her quietly if anyone would worry.

"My dad is on a mission," she answered, and smiled at him. "You look *really* good."

He flushed, grateful for the cover of darkness, and smiled. He was feeling cheered already.

"How could you! How could you! How could you!"

She must have said it a dozen times. Maybe two dozen. Sasuke couldn't think when her face looked so wrecked. All he could see

were the angry tears streaming down her cheeks. When he didn't respond, she started punching his arm. And still he couldn't answer.

He didn't know the answer.

He didn't know how to explain at least without hurting her. Since coming back to Konoha, he had smiled more, and laughed more, but all the sadness and pain and loss did not vanish. He woke up every morning with guilt and fell asleep to regret. He wanted to keep that from her. He wanted to smother his sorrow, to move past sadness.

He didn't want to weigh Sakura down with it. He didn't want to weigh Naruto down either. Each day he tried to be a little happier than the day before, but the ache didn't go away. Sometimes it was easier, sometimes harder, but it was never gone completely. Talking about it to people who just wanted to be happy, who just wanted *him* to be happy, was not something he wanted to do.

And then that woman came. What she had done to his brother, what she had forced him to do to her, was reprehensible, monstrous. And when he saw her kids… He couldn't hold it in. He knew the child did not deserve to carry the burden of his pain anymore than Sakura did, but it came boiling out when he saw that face—his brother's face. Part of him might have been trying to protect the kid.

Or was he just doing to Itachi's son what Itachi had done to him? He didn't know.

"He is my student!" Sakura was screaming at him. "He asked me if he could talk to you! He trusted me. How could you? He is a child. He just wants to know you!"

"Sakura..."

He tried to grab a hold of her. He grasped her wrists, but she pulled her arms free. He wrapped his arms around her body, tried to pull her against his chest, but holding her was like trying to grasp a wriggling fish. She squirmed against his embrace, and became more

violent when he didn't release her. She shoved at his chest until he grunted and let her go.

She pulled back from him, stared into his eyes. All the pieces of her face were quivering.

"You think Uchiha children are cursed?"

Sasuke felt his blood freeze in his veins.

"I—"

She was waiting for him to deny it, and he couldn't, because it was true. She knew it. She would have slapped him if he did deny it.

"You think any children you have would be cursed too."

He opened his mouth.

"No," she said. She shrugged her shoulders in a way that frightened him. Her eyes completely avoided his. "I don't want to talk about it. Not right now."

He attempted to grab hold of her again, but she sidestepped his attempt and slid past him.

"I have to go."

"Sakura..." He caught her elbow, spun her around, tried to kiss her.

She shoved him—hard. "I said I have to *go* ."

He watched her leave, running, not walking, away from him.

He stood for awhile on the porch in the dusk, not thinking or moving or even sure that he was breathing.

At length, Sasuke walked inside in a daze.

He robotically pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat down. Minutes ticked by before he began to feel something in a small part of his chest. Some kind of emotion. As he considered what it might be, it began traveling down his arms and legs until his whole body was trembling with it.

He laid his head against the table. He ached for Sakura.

A knock sounded at his door.

He got up, bewildered, and opened it.

There was no one there, but lying on the doormat was a bouquet of pink, yellow, and white flowers tucked amidst a storm of green leaves and stems.

Naruto stood staring at the board on the wall where he had pinned all the past and upcoming mission requests from the last month so he could see them all at once. In his hands he held a piece of paper. The paper tallied all the revenue earned from missions on one side and numerous expenses on the other. Missions were costing more than they were earning, mostly because there weren't enough high paying jobs. That was the problem with peace, he guessed. Everyone felt safer, and that meant their best Jounin were kicking back on their heels. Managing deployment was getting tricky.

They were going to have to severely limit the number of Chuunin who became Jounin this year, and also the number of Genin who became Chuunin, to keep up with the costs of operation.

And even that might not be enough. He scratched his head as he ambled his way through the complications. More Shinobi were in the village for longer intervals. A consequence he had never considered before was what effect that would have on the population. Everyone was having babies. There were more birth and wedding announcements than they could support with the funding they had. It was exciting, but the village was growing too fast.

There was no help for it. He was going to have to write to the feudal lords.

He sighed. This part of being Hokage was not fun.

A bang startled him out of thoughts. He turned to see Sakura burst through the door. The first thing he reacted to was the fury in her face. He stiffened out of habit, steeling himself for a knock against the head, though he had no idea what for. Instead, she collided against his chest and buried her face into his shoulder.

His arms wrapped comfortingly around her back.

"What happened?" he asked softly.

But he didn't really have to ask. He knew. He had half expected this, while hoping against it, for some time.

"You want me to hit him for you?" he asked her. "I'll gladly sock him anytime."

She laughed. It came out a startled, half-choked sound, soggy with tears, but it was a laugh. She pushed away from his shoulder. She bit her lip, dashed shining tears away from her eyes, and smiled at him.

"Thanks, Naruto," she said, "but no, I don't want you to do that. We just had a fight is all. Itachi came by and Sasuke just…blew up. And I —" She took a couple steadying breaths. "Well I'm sure we'll talk about what he said. It will be fine, I know, but right now I just—I don't want to see him."

"Hmm," Naruto said, and looked again at his wall. "Want to get out of the village? I've got a mission for you and your new team if you think they're ready."

Her eyes lit up at the suggestion. "What is it?"

"Transport mission. Safe delivery of some official records. It will get you out of here. You could leave tonight."

She threw her arms around him. "Thank you! Yes! I'll go find them right away."

The rest of Lucia's tea had gone cold at her elbow.

So Sasuke had killed Itachi Uchiha. That had been one of the rumors that drifted to her ears when she learned he was dead, years ago, but she had never confirmed it. Her imagination circled the implications. The last time she had seen Itachi Uchiha, he had been close to death already.

It was strange. Before she learned of his death, she had spent some time wondering what she would do if, against all reason, he was still alive when she returned to this country. Some part of her had hoped he would be, though it made little sense to wish for it. Sasuke had been after his life, with good reason, which she well understood at the time, and still… Rational or not, there was something about her meetings with Itachi that had always left her with a lingering sense of longing.

She went to him for the pain, but that had ended when he expressed disenchantment with it, and still she kept opening her door to him. It wasn't the physicality alone that drew her. She had a husband for that. It was something particular, a sort of sweetness that was dark and decadent and potent. He made her feel weak and strong in all the opposite ways she was used to. Her fascination was magnetic.

But her attachment had troubled her. The last night she had seen him, she had witnessed his illness for herself. She knew he would not live long. Her reaction had unsettled her more than at any time since she had been forced to marry. What kind of person had she become to be so tenderly attentive to a vicious murderer? It upset her so severely that after they parted, she left the country.

If such a thing was possible with a man about whom she had known next to nothing, what his brother felt—

Lost in thought, she was surprised when her son returned only an hour or so after he had slipped out from under her roof. Given that he had left in a cloud of depression and self-doubt, she was surprised by how excited he seemed when he burst through the door. The resilience of youth, she thought, at least at first, until he spoke.

"I have a mission!" he exclaimed, half crowing with excitement. "We're leaving tonight!"

She blinked. "What?"

He walked right by her and into the kitchen. He rummaged in the cupboards, packing himself meals, it seemed. "It's great," he said. "I couldn't ask for better. I need to get the fuck out of here."

"Excuse me?"

His face colored. "I said need to get out of here," he mumbled, and looked at her sideways. "Sorry."

She let it slide, but not without a frown. "What mission are you talking about?"

"It's a transport trip," he told her. "I don't know the details. We're all going to meet with the Hokage to find out. But I came to tell you first."

Lucia felt like her heart had dropped into her abdomen. Nervousness must have showed on her face, because her son's smile slipped.

"We're just delivering something," he assured her. "I'll be with my team, and with Sakura."

"I don't want you to leave the village."

He stared at her incredulously. "You went out of town and nothing happened!"

She supposed that was true, but it didn't change how she felt.

"Gehard isn't even here," he added. "You said it yourself."

"We don't know that for sure."

"Well, if he is here, and on the slightest chance I happen to get anywhere near him, I don't think he would recognize me. He wouldn't think I'd be a Genin. Besides, I might be able to take him now. I almost hope I do run—"

"Don't talk foolishness! It's not Gehard I'm worried about and you know it."

He dropped his eyes and settled back on his heels. A few moments passed while he considered her words. She crossed her arms. Gehard wasn't nearly as dangerous as those he might hire. Her son understood that. She knew he understood that. But when he looked up, she saw resolution in his face. "I won't do anything stupid," he said more seriously. "I will be careful."

He was so young. If something should happen to him…

"Mom, it doesn't really matter what you think. You wanted me to be a ninja. Well, ninjas have missions. I have to go."

She felt as if she had swallowed a stone. That was true. It was undeniably true. She had encouraged this very thing, knowing from the beginning what it might mean. She had weighed the risk and decided it was for the best. But she couldn't keep her fear down. His young life, so important, so precious to her, was built on so much death and loss. His father. Her father. Looking at the gravity in his face, she felt like she was out to sea in a storm.

"Don't worry," he said, and kissed her cheek. "I'll be fine."

TBC

As always, please review! The comments make all the effort worth it. New people have recently added the story to favorites or put it on alert. Please introduce yourselves and let me know what you think. I would really like it ^^

Chapter 11

Sorry for the delay. There is no beta for this chapter because I wanted to GET IT OUT. I wanted to update in October, but I promised Amour in October. Then NanoWrimo in November. Good news? This chapter is long and lots of stuff happens! I'm exhausted. Enjoy! I'm off to write Amour again… then this again… then the book again… etc.

White Rain

Chapter 11

By Zapenstap

The first time Itachi passed through the Land of Fire his mind had been occupied by disturbing questions such as 'Who am I?' 'Why did my mother want children by a known murderer?' and 'Are these people going to kill us?'

Traveling away from Konoha was an altogether different experience.

Team Four kept grueling hours. In addition to putting their endurance training to good use, Sakura seemed to want to put the maximum amount of distance between them and Konoha each day as humanly possible. She kept her gaze on the horizon, her back straight and head high. For the first few days, she said very little that wasn't about preparations for camp or somehow related to training her Genin students. Her face had a hard-set look to it, as if she were chewing rocks. Itachi had the impression the rocks were breaking on her teeth.

No one mentioned Sasuke, but Itachi knew she was thinking about him. Sakura was upset about what Sasuke had done to his nephew. Although he was sorry she was distressed, her reaction was encouraging in two ways: One, it seemed to mean that Sasuke's

girlfriend accepted him. That had to count for something. Two, the fact that she was appalled by Sasuke's treatment of Itachi showed that she believed *Sasuke* ought to accept him too.

She knew him better than most. Her irritation gave him hope. Resignation would have been worse.

Amaya and Haro didn't seem to notice. If they did, they did a good job pretending they did not. They didn't complain about the pace either. In fact, the pair of them seemed to enjoy the challenge of beating their record each day for how much ground they covered.

One evening, Sakura stopped early.

"We've crossed into the Land of Rivers," she informed them. She looked east and west, making imperceptible judgments about their position. "Let's make camp."

They made camp quickly and adeptly, used to it after so many days. Amaya gathered wood. Itachi made the fire. Haro divided rations for meals. Sakura merely watched and nodded approval.

After they had eaten, Itachi, Amaya, and Haro sat side by side on one side of the crackling flames, burning low on the embers as dusk gathered around them. Sakura sat on the other. She withdrew a scroll from the knapsack on her back. It was sealed.

"Is that the scroll we're delivering?" Amaya asked.

"That's right," Sakura replied. "To the feudal lords of the Land of Rivers. We'll drop it off with officials in New Spring City."

"Why not get a postman to deliver it?" Haro asked. "I'm just asking."

"Ninja are more trustworthy," Sakura replied. "And the information travels faster."

Haro nodded.

Itachi eyed the scroll in silence. It was thin, no thicker than his thumb. The message must be brief, but also important, or fast delivery by ninja wouldn't be necessary. He wasn't sure what to think about that. He probably wasn't supposed to think about it at all, but it was hard not to wonder; his mother had always taught him to keep a sharp eye on communications between powers, if only to know what was going on in the world.

"What does the seal do?" Amaya asked.

"It's a safety measure to protect the contents of the scroll. Standard procedure. If the scroll fell into the wrong hands, the seal prevents the contents from being read—either by corrupting the message or subjugating the reader. I didn't apply it myself."

"So we just deliver it and we're done?" Haro asked, leaning back on his hands. "That sounds easy."

"It is," Sakura replied. "A perfect first mission for new Genin." She tucked the scroll away and stretched her arms above her head. "I wanted to start afresh the day we arrive in the city. We'll sleep early tonight and start again early tomorrow."

That night, Itachi bedded down with his back to the earth and his feet to the fire, staring up at the stars in the sky overhead. Beside him, Haro was already out, breathing heavily. Sakura was asleep too; she seemed to have a skill of falling asleep at will, almost the instant she closed her eyes. She woke up just as fast.

On his other side, Amaya lay with her back to him. He turned his head and stared at her back for a few minutes, pushing thoughts around in his head. Her breathing wasn't even at all.

"Amaya," he whispered. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah," she whispered back, and turned over so that he could see her face. Her cheek rested softly against her wrist and starlight made

her skin glow pale and smooth, like ivory. Her eyes gleamed faintly in the dark. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I was just wondering. Have you always wanted to do this?"

"Do what?"

"Be a ninja."

"I've never wanted anything else," she said. "Are you worried about-?" She stopped suddenly, and sat up. "Did you hear that?"

Itachi sat up beside her, ears straining in the darkness. Clouds passed over the moon. The shadows deepened. It was difficult to make out trees, much less people; darkness obscured everything. He couldn't even make out Amaya's face anymore. But there was a sense of something moving not far from their camp—slowly at first, a kind of creeping.

Amaya leapt to her feet. "Rise! We're under attack."

Sakura was already gone, her blanket lying abandoned near the coals of the fire. Amaya had time to do little more than form hand signs before a volley of needles flew at them from the south. Itachi ducked beneath them, kicking Haro in the process. Haro grunted. He was awake too, lying flat on his stomach, hands flat on the earth. The needles passed over both their heads.

Itachi's eyes sought Amaya. A substitution log sat where she had been standing, needles stuck to it from all sides like a pin cushion. Were they poison? Sedatives? He formed hand signs for a substitution of his own just before a second volley of needles followed the first.

Itachi darted out of the campsite and into the trees, eyes penetrating the darkness, searching for friend or foe alike. His hand gripped the handle of one of his kunai knives, though he hoped he wouldn't be

forced into a hand-to-hand fight. His skill had improved, but he didn't think these were Genin attacking them. Where was Sakura?

Haro emerged out of the darkness in a crouch beside him, a finger to his lips. "Relax. I followed you," he said. "They're Grass Ninja. I saw a head plate."

Itachi just stared at him, trying to make out his features in the dark, hand on his knife handle, heart beating hard in his chest. "How do I know you're you?"

Haro grimaced. "Good point. You're Itachi. And before a few weeks ago, we didn't get along so well. Also, it was my fault you got stabbed in the knee. Does that suffice?"

"Yeah," Itachi said, though he didn't let go of his knife.

An explosion rocked the forest some distance to the southwest. Itachi recognized the sound. It was trees blowing into pieces. "Sakura," he muttered. "What do we do?"

"Stay low," Haro said. "There's Jounin with them, I think. At least they're no slouches."

"Can Sakura take on *several* Jounin by herself?" Itachi demanded.

Haro just shook his head. "We'll just get in her way if we engage, or get killed. She drew them off on purpose. She can't fight and protect us at the same time. Mostly likely, she'll lead them out a ways, escape, and double back for us. Come on."

They wended their way through the forest, darting around trees and couching behind bushes for cover, eyes and ears straining for sight of any targets that might have hung back. All was quiet, but Itachi didn't trust quiet. It was *too* quiet.

"Found them."

Haro and Itachi backed up as one, kunai knives flung simultaneously from their hands as strangers in head plates dropped to the ground from the trees limbs in front of them. Their kunai knives were easily blocked.

"They're just Genin," one of the Grass Ninja said to the other two. They both wore head plates with three vertical slashes across the front. The two that had not spoken lifted reed pipes to their lips. More needles. Were they trying to take them alive?

Haro wove hand signs Itachi hadn't seen from him before, but he recognized the signs for Earth. An elemental jutsu?

Haro's hands hit the ground just as the needles flew. A wall of rock and mud rose straight up into the air, blocking their view of the targets, but also intercepting the needles.

"That won't hold them for long," Haro gasped.

"Haro! Itachi!"

Itachi and Haro turned their heads together. It was Amaya's voice. She crashed out of the bushes behind them, hair wild around a face streaked with dirt. There was a cut on one of her shoulders. A trail of dried blood snaked down her arm. Her hand clutched something tightly.

She pointed to their right with the other hand. A steep slope dropped maybe twenty feet into a briar patch. "Go that way!" she hissed at them. "I'll meet you on the other side."

Haro exchanged glances with Itachi. "All right," he said, and pulled on Itachi's arm.

Amaya's warm brown eyes stared past them, into the darkness to the left of Haro's wall, as if she could separate the shadows with her gaze and pull it back like a curtain. "Here they come," she said.

Itachi turned his head away, just before the shuriken flew from Amaya's hands. Seconds later, they erupted in a blinding white flash.

Haro shoved him. "Move!" he bellowed, and darted past him.

Itachi skidded down the slope, hands grasping at fistfuls of undergrowth to slow his descent. Ahead of him, Haro reached bottom and scrambled head first through a hole under the bramble bushes—just like a rabbit. Itachi ducked after him. Stickers poked him on all sides, but he lowered himself to the ground and felt his way through in the dark, wincing whenever thorns pulled at his clothes and tore his skin. He itched, but his thinking was not on comfort. It wasn't long until he found Haro. Haro waited for Itachi to catch up and then continued on, pulling himself along by the elbows. They wriggled their way out of the brambles bit by bit. When they reached the other side, they climbed out slowly, crouching in the dirt, knives at the ready. Itachi kept still and silent as possible, listening for movement in any direction.

"Haro!"

It was Amaya's voice, whispering out in the dark. They followed the sound, crouching low to the ground, ears straining and eyes darting. Amaya's slender form rose from another hole in the briars, sliding out of the darkness like a shadow within a shadow. Itachi could barely see her eyes gleaming, but he knew they were hers. More cuts decorated her neck and shoulders and hands.

"Sakura was taken," she gasped. "Those Grass Ninja stuck her with those needles. She went as limp as a dead fish. They carried her off." Her voice was calm, but Itachi could see the fright in the wideness of her eyes. She was panting too. He reached out for her arm. It was cold and trembling.

"Amaya," he began.

"I have the scroll," she continued. "We need to hurry. They'll sweep this area."

Itachi and Haro agreed. Itachi couldn't think of anything else to do.

They headed northwest, running the whole way, veering enough only to dig out a few false trails, then doubling backing again. They ran until Itachi's legs felt like jelly. Just when he thought he might fall over, Haro spotted a grove of trees on a ridge not far off. A closer inspection revealed a dirt pit dug out of the hill and surrounded by trees on all sides.

"I think we've lost them," Haro muttered. "Let's stop. Amaya, sit down. You look like you're gonna pass out."

Amaya knelt, shaking like a leaf. Itachi eased himself down beside her. She had the scroll clutched in her fist, her knuckles white around the end of it. Itachi touched her hand and she slowly opened her fingers. Taking a breath, she set the scroll on the ground between the three of them.

After a bit of discussion, they decided to build a small fire. Protected as they were by the ridge and the trees, light would allow them to see each other's faces and make plans. Haro gathered the wood and Itachi set it ablaze with a sparker. The small, dancing blaze cheered him a little, but most of what he felt was numb.

They all sat in a circle around it, not quite looking at each other. No one touched the scroll.

"So what do we do?" Haro demanded. "I mean, I know we have to try and rescue Sakura—"

"No!" Amaya objected. "Don't look at me like that, Haro. I don't want to leave her, but what can the three of us do against Jounin from the Grass? I'm not that good and you aren't either. They must want the scroll. We have it. The best thing to do is get it to a safe place. We can go back to Konoha. Then we can get help for Sakura too."

"They'll expect that," Haro objected. "We'll have to go back the way we came and they'll be lying in wait, no doubt, ready to waylay us.

They *won't* expect us to come after Sakura, and if we manage to free her—"

"I get what you're saying, but Amaya's right," Itachi interrupted. "We can't hope to take on Jounin. They'll be on guard even if they don't expect us."

"Well, what's *your* idea?"

Itachi thought quickly. "They probably won't hurt Sakura once they realize she doesn't have the scroll. She's their only collateral and hurting her would be big trouble with Konoha ."

"So you want to leave her too," Haro said. He rolled his eyes. "I can't believe this. I here I thought I was the shoddy one."

"Maybe we should split up?" Amaya suggested. "One of us can track Sakura, another can go for help, the third can hide with the scroll?"

Itachi shook his head. "We're outclassed as it is. We need to stay together. We're stronger together."

Amaya frowned, but she seemed to agree. Haro just looked surly.

Itachi looked at the scroll lying on the ground between the three of them. "I think we should take the scroll to New Spring City. Complete the mission. If we can outrun the Grass, we can make it. They might spend some time in this area looking for us. And like Haro said, they might expect us to turn back for Konoha."

"Do we even know who we're supposed to deliver it to?" Amaya asked.

Itachi took a deep breath. He was glad they didn't shoot the idea down right away. Sakura had said the scroll was from the Land of Fire to the Land of Rivers, and that it was feudal lord business, but she hadn't said who the recipient was supposed to be or where to

find that person. Presumably, there was no need for them to know; maybe they weren't even *supposed* to know. But-

"We could read it," Itachi said. "Maybe there's a name."

Amaya stared.

Haro's mouth dropped open. "Are you crazy? It's sealed! Anything can happen if you open it!"

"So only one of us will try," Itachi said. "I'll volunteer. If something happens to me…"

"Not on your life!" Haro objected. "This idea is worse than mine. What if you die or something? How am I supposed to explain it? I'm not *carrying* you to New Spring City!"

The space between Amaya's eyebrows pinched in worry. "I don't like it either," she said at last, "but it might be the best thing to do. We weren't forbidden to read it after all."

"Don't *you* go nuts on me!" Haro hissed.

Amaya sighed. "My father works with seals. The one on the scroll doesn't look complicated. I think it's meant to keep ordinary people from reading the contents, not ninja. No one probably expected a need to keep ninja from the contents. It's only a C-rank mission after all; how important can it be?"

"The pair of you are barking mad!"

Two out of three. Itachi would have preferred a consensus, but they didn't have time to argue Haro into agreement; he was mule headed enough when he *knew* he was wrong, and he had a good position in this case. It had to be chanced.

"If it explodes or something—" Haro began.

Itachi picked up the scroll. "Well, go stand over there then. I'm going to open it."

Amaya got to her feet. She grabbed Haro's arm, pulling him up with her, and hauled him away from Itachi. Haro protested the whole way, nattering in her ear about 'crazed head cases' and 'what happened to caution?'

Itachi ignored them both. He knelt on the ground and stared at the scroll, tracing the lines of the seal that secured the flap closed. Sakura had said that opening the scroll would either do something to the message or the one opening it. If it was the message, the worst outcome was that a second message would have to be delivered. If it was the user, he could only hope that Amaya and Haro between them could repair the damage.

He picked up the scroll and thumbed the flap. Hesitating only a moment, he slowly and carefully peeled it back. The scroll unwound. Just before he uncovered ink, beginning—he hoped—with the name of the recipient, a sound went off in his head like a sharp ping. A poof of white air obscured his vision.

He blinked, momentarily confused. He looked down at his hands. The scroll was gone.

"Did it burn up?" he asked, and turned to look over his shoulder at Amaya and Haro.

They were gone.

"This is genjutsu," he said aloud.

He could almost see the chakra, like a shimmer in the air at the corner of his vision. Odd. He had never seen that in practice. He stared at his hands, right where he had been holding the scroll, and concentrated on what he *knew* was reality. He knew he was holding the scroll. His thinking sharpened. The shimmer at the edge of his

eyesight broke into pieces. Remnants of chakra floated before his eyes like dust motes, and vanished.

The scroll rematerialized in his hands.

Itachi blinked and looked up. Amaya and Haro were crouching in front of him again. Haro had a hand up as if about to strike him. When he instinctively covered his head, they both leapt backwards.

"Whoa!" Haro shouted.

Itachi stared at the open scroll, abstractedly noting that it did *not* have a recipient's name. In fact, it wasn't even a written message like he had expected, though it struck him as somehow familiar.

"I don't understand," Amaya said.

"We didn't do anything," Haro said. "I was about to club you, but you just… came out of it. Must have been a weak seal? Could have been corrupted. Or maybe it's only supposed to last for a few seconds."

Frowning, Itachi looked up.

Amaya gasped. "Itachi!"

"What?" he asked.

Her face relaxed when his gaze locked onto her. "Oh, never mind," she said. "It was just the fire light. For a second there, I thought I saw-"

Itachi touched his face, feeling around his eyes, but of course he couldn't see himself. He didn't feel different. She must have imagined it.

"What does the scroll say?" Haro asked, edging closer around the fire.

Itachi showed him and Amaya too, lying the scroll flat across his knee.

Haro just looked perplexed. Amaya frowned.

Groups of letters and numbers were scrawled on the parchment, sitting side by side in straight perpendicular and horizontal lines that formed a matrix. There were funny symbols next to the numbers, but Itachi didn't know what they meant. The letters were written along the top and one of the ends of the matrix, but they didn't spell anything. He stared at it while Amaya and Haro conversed quietly.

"Code?" Amaya asked.

Haro sat, crossing his arms. Reaching out, he snatched the scroll off from Itachi's knee and flipped it over so that it was upright to him and upside down to Itachi. In looking at it upside down, it came to Itachi suddenly why it looked so familiar.

"It's not code," Itachi said. He took the scroll back from Haro and spread it out on the dirt do they could all see. "I think I know what it is. Or part of it anyway."

"You do?" Amaya asked.

It wasn't a matrix. It was a table. He had been staring at tables like this every night for weeks. He hadn't recognized it at first because it lacked the symbols and gridlines he was used to, and because he had been expecting something different, but if he added those in mentally, and then added up the numbers consistently…

Itachi drew his finger across the columns and rows with the groupings of letters, starting with LF. "These are labels, acronyms probably, though I don't know for what. The numbers are all in the middle. If you draw an imaginary line here, they become totals, see? For the calculations to make sense, this symbol here would have to indicate a loss. If you subtract those numbers and add the rest, you get these ones over here. Except-"

He stopped speaking.

The numbers were so small. It was easy to crunch them in his head, and maybe that was why he had seen it so fast, but why would nations exchange correspondence about numbers so low? Maybe it wasn't finances. It could be something else they were counting. Or maybe the numbers stood for larger units? The number eight might be eight hundred, or eight thousand, or eight million. There was no way to know.

"What do the acronyms mean?" Amaya asked, her eyes darting over the rows and columns, eyebrows scrunched in thought.

Itachi scanned the list. There were over a dozen two and three letter acronyms. LF was the first listed. He stared at it for several seconds, chewing his lip, until a possibility came to him. He scanned down, looking for LV. He found it in the middle. There was an LR too.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but 'LV' could mean 'Leaf Village' and 'LF' could be 'Land of Fire'. And over there, Land of Rivers."

He paused. It seemed plausible.

"Leaf Village," Amaya murmured, sitting back on her heels. "Land of Fire, Land of Rivers…" She frowned. "This could just be business correspondence."

"Why kidnap Sakura over that?" Haro asked. "Where's the intelligence worth fighting over?"

Itachi frowned at the numbers. If LV meant Leaf Village then according to this document, Konoha had a number of zeroes and an ending balance that was below zero. Of course, he had no idea what the numbers referred to. The acronyms on the top of the matrix were a mystery.

"Hey," Haro said. "You missed something."

He shoved Itachi's hand aside, which had been covering up the very end of the document. A single line was scrawled underneath the table. Someone had circled it.

Note White Rain.

"What does that mean?" Amaya asked.

Itachi scanned the document. None of the acronyms were WR, not that that would necessarily tell him anything. "I don't know," he admitted. "But it might be the reason this was sent."

"Or maybe the reason it was wanted by the Grass," Amaya muttered.

"So what do we do?" Haro muttered. "Where does this go?"

Itachi was silent, thinking. He fingered the rough edge of the scroll, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger absently. At length, he rolled up the scroll and got to his feet. "I know where we can take it if we can get to the city. It will be secure anyway. And in the city, we'll at least be able to send a message to Konoha, by air, for help. It is faster than if we tried to run back."

"Where do you want to take it?" Haro asked.

"The bank."

Sakura awoke in pitch black, cheek flat against a surface that felt and smelled like wood. She knew the area was confined because she was lying with her knees bent and she could touch all four walls without shifting or straining.

Stay calm.

She assessed the situation.

She was in a crate.

They had drugged her, probably with those needles, but the drugs were wearing off. That was lucky—well, not quite luck. Sakura had been building up a tolerance to poisons and sleep inducers over the years. Hopefully, they would expect her to be out much longer. That gave her an edge.

She was being moved. Through the floor board, she could hear the crunch of rock and sticks being ground a short distance below her. That meant she was being carried, probably on a wagon, or something with wheels. Did that mean they had expected to take survivors?

Through the wooden walls of the crate, she couldn't hear any voices. Either the people carrying her were very quiet, or they had nothing to say at the moment.

What to do?

If she was the only one captured, escape would be easier. She could bust out of this crate with one punch, and if surprise was her ally, she could get away. But to do so in haste might be a mistake. Her Genin might be nearby, being held as collateral to keep her quiet; she couldn't afford to risk them. She might learn something by keeping still and listening. Patience would serve her better to start.

How did she get here?

Something was off for her to have screwed up this royally! Back at the camp, her reactions had felt…slow. She was tired too—physically exhausted. She had been sleeping fitfully since leaving Konoha. Her chakra hadn't molded as nicely as she was used to. In battle, that had thrown her off. She had been badly outnumbered, and one mistake had cost her.

Had she been in the village too long? Was she getting rusty? She hadn't considered that helping out with administrative and hospital duties would have weakened her. She had only done it because work for Jounin was getting scarce and Naruto had needed her help.

It really hadn't been that long. Since Sasuke had decided to stay in the village and take it easy for awhile, it had seemed like a good idea.

Ugh, Sasuke.

Maybe her problems were emotional. Emotion had its place, but uncontrolled emotion could make a ninja sloppy, and she was nothing if not emotional when it came to Sasuke. She had been particularly irritable lately. Taking this mission was evidence of that if nothing else. Of course, she and Sasuke would make up, and maybe the time apart would make their reunion all the sweeter, but for the moment she had just wanted *not* to see him.

She didn't blame him entirely. She knew *why* Sasuke did what he did. She knew too that he needed her, and that he loved her, and that she loved him, but ….

She closed her eyes. Trapped in a box, there was nothing to do but think.

What Sasuke had done to Itachi—his nephew, whether he recognized it or not—was just… mean. Of course, maybe he hadn't meant to be. Sakura could see how Sasuke might think that scaring the boy out of asking questions about the Uchiha would save him grief, but Itachi couldn't know that, so it amounted to being mean as far as the boy was concerned. Besides, Itachi hadn't wanted to know about the secrets of the Sharingan or the Uchiha's blood-stained history or the murders. He just wanted to know what his father was like. There was a lot Sasuke could have told him. Except doing so would probably have hurt Sasuke.

Sasuke had no one to talk to about Itachi. He refused to, because no one could possibly care as much as he did. But here was this boy who *wanted* to know, and Sasuke's reaction was not only to shut him out, but to do it in such a hateful manner that it left no question as to what Sasuke thought about children by his brother.

Or himself.

Sasuke breathed deeply of the darkness.

She had to face facts. If Sasuke never wanted children, and deep down it didn't seem like he did, she couldn't have children either, not as long as she stayed with him. That was hard to think about. She loved Saskue. She wanted children. Sasuke didn't want children.

UGH. What was she supposed to do if…

Her eyes flew open.

One thought froze her solid.

Tired. Irritable. Sloppy. Trouble molding chakra.

Impossible!

Well… not *strictly* impossible, but there was no reason to jump to conclusions. There were lots of reasons to explain how she lost a fight and wound up in this box. Being trapped just made her imagine the worst. But she couldn't keep thoughts of the worst from bubbling up like froth.

Oh God , she thought. *No no no* .

It was all she could do to remain still.

Focus, Sakura!

First things first. She had a mission to complete. She had to return those three Genin kids safely home. And she had to alert the Hokage that Grass Ninja were hostile to the Leaf. She would deal with what was most immediately in front of her, starting with this box.

She closed her eyes, slowly gathering her chakra, preparing for her moment.

Voices filtered to her ears while she worked. Finally.

"Those kids didn't head back to Konoha like we thought," someone said. It sounded like a report, as if they had just concluded the matter. How long had she been out? "They're either hiding in the woods or they've gone to New Spring City."

Sakura breathed in the darkness, straining her ears. All three kids? It sounded like all three. Good for them to have escaped! She had given Amaya the scroll and told her to run. She had assumed they would go back to Konoha too, but it seemed they hadn't, and that had been the right choice. New Spring City. But the Grass was on to them. And if that were true—

Sakura's fist flamed to life, ferocity swelling her chakra along the back of her fingers. Breaking objects wasn't about being stronger than the object. It was about piling force on a single *point* that was weaker, and hitting it with speed and surety. What mattered was that she hit it hard enough for the assailing part of her body to bounce off the target. It was her chakra that would continue *through* the object.

It was with this mentality that she struck the ceiling above her face. The box split into shards, the pieces falling around her as she rose from the debris.

She had to reach those kids before the Grass!

New Spring City was bustling, noisy, dirty, and overflowing with people who did not know each other.

It worked to their benefit. Itachi, Amaya, and Haro didn't stick out. After some arguing, they had even decided to remove their ninja headbands and any accessories that obviously identified them as ninja. Someone might be searching for three Leaf Genin. Itachi had no intention of being detained.

"What are we going to tell the bank?" Haro demanded.

"I'm thinking about that," Itachi said.

Amaya didn't say anything. Itachi hoped her silence meant she was supportive.

They edged their way through the city streets, blending with the crowds, but keeping close together, eyes and ears open. Itachi asked for directions minimally, and only from merchants with established shops. They avoided speaking to anyone else.

Fortunately, the bank was easy to find. It stood in the middle of town, a monolithic block of marble encircled by white stone steps. Anyone walking up or down those steps would be seen by the people in town as well as the bank, which had a pair of guards in front of the doors.

Itachi had chosen the bank for what he felt were obvious reasons. The feudal lords of the Land of Fire as well as those of the Land of Rivers would be known by the bank executives. They would have guarded vaults for valuables, and banks were unlikely to pry into private financial matters, as doing so was extremely bad for business. Getting it across the country was the reason for Shinobi. Once in the city, whoever was supposed to receive the scroll would learn it was safe and would easily be able to send for it. If they made the delivery without incident, the Grass would never know to look here. If they were caught, the scroll would still be delivered.

The problem now was getting past security. Not only did they have to get past the doors but they also had to convince the bank staff to let them talk to someone important enough to agree to deposit the scroll. It didn't help that they had nothing on hand to pay for the service.

"Are they even going to let us in?" Haro demanded.

Amaya eyed the guards nervously, though she still didn't say anything. They weren't Shinobi guards, but that didn't make them pushovers, and they needed an amicable entrance.

"Transformation," Haro suggested. "One of us can pretend to be Sakura."

"And say what?" Amaya demanded. "That we're from the Leaf but we forgot where we were going?"

Haro shrugged. "Then let's just tell the truth."

Itachi chewed the inside of his lip. Telling the truth could be just as precarious as telling a lie. It might ensure the success of the mission, but it could damage Konoha's reputation. It would also be trouble is the Grass came asking questions, though they may not be able to avoid that.

"Maybe we should wait," Amaya said. "Sakura might get herself out and find us."

"I have one idea," Itachi said. "If it works, we won't have to lie or tell the truth. If it doesn't, we can retreat and wait for Sakura, at least for awhile."

He had been thinking about it all the way to New Spring City. Even if they made it to the bank, what were they going to say?

At first, he hadn't been able to think of anything. When an idea did come to him, he felt dissatisfied with it. It wasn't the kind of thing a Shinobi would come up with. In fact, it was kind of embarrassing. Besides which, it would mean breaking his promise to his mother. Still, it might work, and it wouldn't be much of a risk.

"What is it?" Amaya asked.

"Because it's a bank," he explained heavily, "I might get by if I…say the right things."

Amaya and Haro exchanged confused glances.

He intended to trade on his family name, which might be recognized in these parts, though it was a gamble, and a risk.

Itachi didn't like it, but he wasn't sure he really had a choice. They came here to complete the mission, and relying on the part of him that was a ninja—his father's genes—hadn't helped him much lately. Maybe it would another day, when he had more training, but not today. Time was a luxury; he couldn't screw up on account of ignorance. He had to use what he knew.

"Come on," he said, and started up the broad stone steps toward the bank's double doors. Amaya and Haro caught up quickly, separating to flank him on either side. The eyes of the guards turned toward them as one.

When he was within arm's length of the bank's threshold, Itachi stopped.

One of the guards spoke. "What's your business?"

"I wish to deliver something," he said.

The expressions of the guards didn't change a hair, but Itachi could feel their suspicion.

"I'd like to speak to an official about it," Itachi said.

"You'll have to show us what you're delivering, boy."

Itachi withdrew the scroll from his jacket. Amaya had resealed it, though her seal didn't contain a genjutsu; it just held the paper together. Still, it might fool someone. He held it up so the guards could see it, but didn't open the flap. "It's for the eyes of the feudal lords only. My name is Itachi Van Alstyne."

The guards exchanged glances. There was no reason they would know the name, but they would be acquainted with the air of someone who expected to be recognized. They didn't say anything, but Itachi could guess what they were thinking; if he was telling lies, or pulling a prank, they wouldn't hold back on throttling him.

However, the claim was so audacious, that it might be true. If it was true, and they threw him out, they would be the ones to be throttled.

Itachi felt sweat beading on his forehead along his hairline. Fortunately, the guards seemed to decide that the nerve of his statement warranted admittance to at least the lobby. Itachi took a deep breath as he and his teammates were ushered inside the building, but didn't relax. Convincing the bank official would be harder.

The inside of the bank was as austere as the outside. A polished floor reflected the glow from the lights hanging overhead. Counters lined the wall on the right, but only two men were present on the other side. There didn't appear to be any customers at this hour, though in the far corner, Itachi could see a kid sitting in a chair, looking bored—probably someone's son. The bank was otherwise empty.

The two bank officials looked up from their conversation when Itachi and his team were escorted in by one of the guards. In silence, the older and probably senior of the two walked out from behind the counter and strode across the plaza toward them. His face was stern, his hands clasped in front of him.

"What seems to be the trouble?" he asked, addressing the guard.

Itachi heard Haro make an indignant sound in the back of his throat.

"No trouble," Itachi answered, as if the official had spoken to him to begin with. The guard shot him a look, which Itachi ignored. He drew on experience, mimicking every shred of arrogance he had ever observed from his mother. "I would like to speak to a senior manager. Alone please."

The man's eyebrows climbed halfway up his head. "I am the senior manager of this branch." With a nod, he dismissed the guards.

Itachi waited until they were out of earshot. "I have a delivery for the feudal lords of the River Country," he said. He didn't say that it was an important delivery, or that he expected to be obeyed, and he refused to think how ludicrous that was. Surety in his tone had to speak for his authority. He had to sound as if he were accustomed to being taken seriously.

"May I ask who you are?" the manager asked. He seemed to be struggling between being amused, alarmed, and annoyed. Where he landed depended on what Itachi could convince him was true without giving away any compromising information.

"Itachi Van Alstyne."

The bank manager frowned, his lips drawing into a thin line, but before he could open his mouth to speak, the kid Itachi had noticed loafing in a chair on the other side of the room sprang to his feet.

Itachi, Amaya, and Haro looked up as one. Itachi just gasped. He must have sounded shocked, or worse, because Haro reactively reached for a knife. Before Haro could bare steel, Amaya tapped two fingers against his wrist, staying his hand.

Itachi's eyes remained locked on the face of the kid. It took him several slow processing seconds to admit to himself that he knew this boy, possibly the last person in the world he expected to see.

"Jered Lassen?"

It had to be Jered. There was no mistaking that face. The last time Itachi had seen it, it had been through a fiery cloud of rage, with Rina's voice shrieking in the background. The memory seemed to come from a million years ago, before he had learned his father wasn't Gehard, before he had heard of chakra, back when his daily occupation had been studying and taking care of his sister. But the memory was powerful. He could still hear bone crunching. He could still see the way blood that had exploded from the nose he broke with his fist.

It seemed to have healed now. At least, Jered looked no worse than Itachi remembered from school. He seemed just as surprised to see Itachi.

The bank official blinked. "You know this boy, Master Lassen?"

"Yeah," Jered said as he neared. "Itachi Van Alsyne. He's a… family friend. You know."

Itachi almost choked on his tongue.

The bank manager's reaction was astonishing. "My apologies," he murmured. Turning, he gave Itachi a slight bow. "You had a delivery?"

Haro's eyes looked like they were going to bug out of his head.

"Uh…Yeah," Itachi said. He held the scroll out. "This goes…where I said it does."

The bank manager took the scroll. "A missive will be delivered. This will be held until it is sent for." He turned his head between Itachi and Jered. "Would you like a private room?"

"Um—" Itachi began.

"Yes, great," Jered interjected. "That would be great!"

Itachi could feel Amaya and Haro's incredulous stares crawling all over his back. He felt dazed, reacting slowly as the bank official waved the guard away and escorted the four of them to an office room with solid, probably sound proof walls and a rectangular conference table.

Itachi opened his mouth to inquire about when the scroll would be placed in the vault, but the bank manager answered the question before he could formulate the words. He was assured that the scroll would be secured directly. The manager then politely excused himself.

"What the *hell* ?" Haro said when the official shut the door. It was unclear to whom his demand was directed, but the cross, bewildered look on his face seemed to communicate everything for everybody. Amaya's lips were slightly parted, her eyes wide.

Itachi didn't know how to respond. He felt his face flushing. "Uh, this is Jered Lassen," he said. "I...went to school with him…back home. Jered, this is Amaya and Haro, new friends of mine."

"What a change!" Amaya exclaimed, ignoring introductions in her excitement, which seemed to take Jered aback. "I thought they were about ready to throw us out." She turned to Jered. "You must be someone important."

Jered glanced sideways at Itachi. He looked a little wild about the eyes. "Never mind me," he said, not quite meeting Amaya's eyes as he pulled out a chair and slowly sat down across from them. "I got dragged here, that's all." He looked at Itachi as if staring at a ghost—or a corpse. "What are you doing here?"

Amaya's mouth closed. She exchanged a look with Haro.

"What am I doing here?" Itachi exclaimed. "You're supposed to be halfway across the world!"

"Yeah," Jered said. "I guess I don't get to fail economics this year, do I? But no one gives a damn about me. *Everyone* is looking for you."

"What do you mean *everybody* is looking for me? Are you here with Gehard?"

"My folks are. So are Elle's folks, and Perry's, though they didn't come themselves. I had to because there was no one to watch me." He made a face and then shrugged. "Making me come here was a good excuse for my parents to pull me out of that cursed school before I could fail out."

Itachi's head spun. Elle and Perry were both old classmates of his. He wasn't good friends with either of them, but he saw them occasionally outside of school at holiday parties because their parents all ran in the same social circles. Well, Gehard's circle, anyway. Itachi's mother was friendly to Gehard's friends and their wives, but they didn't socialize beyond pleasantries. His mother didn't socialize with anybody except her sister. She wasn't well liked.

But why were those families *here* ? He couldn't imagine what interest Jered's family, upstarts on the social tier, could have in Gehard's personal business. He wasn't afraid of Jered, but being seen by him complicated matters.

"Where is Gehard?" Itachi asked.

Jered licked his lips. "He went back home. He didn't say why, but it has to do with your family—some way to lure your mother out. He left us here to keep an eye on things, but he's coming back."

Itachi held up both hands. "Why are your folks helping him?"

Jered stared at him as if he was crazy. "You don't know? When it was discovered that your mom kidnapped you and fled the country, the whole *town* was in an uproar."

" *Kidnapped* me?"

Itachi felt as if he had been punched in the gut. He had never thought about it that way, but he supposed it was technically accurate. Legally, if his mother took him and Rina out of the country without Gehard's knowledge—who was equally their guardian—it constituted a kidnapping. But why would the whole town care so much? He doubted it was his safety that concerned them. While his head was still ringing, Jered plowed on with the surprises.

"Everyone's in a stir about her disappearing. No one knew she *could* or something, I guess. It's all anyone talks about, and you're mentioned a lot too. I don't know the details, but I know that

everyone wants a piece of your mother, and not in the way I thought when we…fought."

"Sorry about that," Itachi muttered abstractedly. "I shouldn't have hit you. I was going to apologize."

"No, it's you hit me, it…shocked me more than anything, but in a good way. I know it sounds weird, but that's when I realized you were a nice guy. I mean, I goaded *you* because I *knew* you were nice. I didn't see that punch coming. It really put things in perspective. I hated that school. I hated everyone there. You were the nicest person I knew."

"I wasn't that nice," Itachi admitted. "I could have helped you study instead." The words spilled from his mouth easily enough, but his head was wrapped in a cloud of near-delirium. He couldn't focus. Everyone wanted a *piece* of his mom? What had she *done* ?

"Thanks," Jered said, sitting a little straighter, "but you'd better get out of here. If my father sees you, he'll try to hold you here. That'll work better to lure your mom than whatever idea Gehard's got."

Itachi stared at Jered, not because of what he said—it was obvious he couldn't afford to get trapped—but because of why he said it. "You're helping me? Against your parents?"

"Well… yeah. My father anyway."

Itachi didn't know what to say. He didn't understand at all what was going on.

Jered looked down at the table. "I know this sounds crazy, but... your mom is kind of my hero."

Itachi didn't think he could feel any more dazed.

"I know how Gehard treats her. My dad talks about it sometimes."

"He does?"

"He says things like how he'd like to give that 'bitch whore' what she deserves. Stuff like that."

Itachi stiffened.

Jered looked away. "Sorry. I just thought you should know. My dad is… kind of an ass. I don't know if you noticed. And he doesn't treat my mom so well either. When your mom left, I thought it was kind of great. Sometimes I wish my mom could do that—leave with me, I mean. If it were just the two of us, she'd let me go back to normal school; I did pretty well at normal school. Anyway, if it were me, I'd want my mom to get away with it. So… I guess that's why."

Itachi closed his mouth. He hadn't had any idea that Jered's father was cruel to his mother. He wondered in what way. Did he beat her? Did he belittle and demean her? Did Jered's mother have the same sort of problems that Itachi's mother seemed to have with pain? Did she seem to encourage it? Did she send her kids out of the house well in advance of when she knew it was coming? By the helpless, faraway look in Jered's eyes, Itachi doubted that last part was the same. Besides, he had met Jered's mother. She was a sweet, generous woman, both likable and unobtrusive, nothing at all like his mother. Still, maybe that was worse. Itachi was angry because he had always felt that if his mother just stood up for herself, Gehard wouldn't touch her. Maybe that wasn't true in Jered's house.

Itachi had almost forgotten Amaya and Haro were there. He could feel Amaya's eyes on him, and turned to look at her. Compassion and understanding graced her face. On his other side, Haro was silent. His eyes were troubled and he didn't quite look at any of them. It almost seemed as if he felt… guilty. Itachi wondered about that. Haro had a loud, boisterous family, the members of which often sounded angry when they spoke with each other, but Haro had seemed unconcerned about their tempers. In fact, he seemed to really treasure his family, and spoke of them often. Maybe he felt guilty about having such good luck.

"What do you know about Gehard's plan?" Itachi asked Jered.

The other boy shook his head. "I don't know what he plans. I just know he went back home for something and that we're supposed to wait until he returns."

"Does he know where to find my mother?" Itachi asked.

"Some village," Jered said. "One of those ninja villages." He paused. All at once, he seemed to take in Itachi's clothes, as well as those of his companions. Astonishment flitted across his face. His mouth dropped open, but no words formed.

"Okay," Itachi said quickly, before Jered could sort through his thoughts enough to ask questions. He shoved back from the table and stood up. Haro and Amaya rose with him. "Do you know if any ninja were hired to be watching for me?"

Amaya gasped. Haro was staring at Itachi.

Jered shrugged. "We—I mean Gehard and my father and the others—have hired ninja. No one's told me why and they don't speak to me. I rarely see them."

"How many?" Amaya asked. "What village?"

"I've seen a dozen different ones come and go. I don't know where they're from."

"They'd be wearing headbands," Itachi urged him. "With symbols carved in the middle."

Jered just looked confused. "I don't know what—"

Haro pulled his headband out of his jacket pocket and shook it over the tabletop. "Like this."

Amaya took hers out too, grimly refastening it around her head. Itachi supposed there wasn't a point to hiding it anymore.

Jered's wide eyes darted between Amaya and Haro. "Yeah. They wore those. There were slashes in them, though. All vertical, slightly slanted."

"Grass Ninja," Amaya said, sharing a look with Haro. "It can't be a coincidence. What do we do?"

"I think we need to get out of here," Haro muttered. "And fast. Those bank guards aren't Shinobi. We should be able to slip past them."

"What about Jered?" Itachi asked.

"I won't say anything!" Jered said. "I swear I won't. I don't know anything they don't know already anyway."

"You know Itachi was here," Amaya said, "and that he's a Genin for the Leaf."

Jered's head whipped toward Itachi for confirmation. Itachi sighed. Jered hadn't guessed that. He had probably assumed Amaya and Haro were *guarding* him. What was obvious to Amaya wasn't to a foreigner. Too late now. Slowly, Itachi withdrew his own headband. It felt strange putting it on in front of Jered, but Jered just seemed excited by it. His wide mouth turned upward in a giddy smile.

"I won't say anything!" Jered said. "I won't even tell them I saw you."

"The bank manager will," Haro pointed out. "If your friend says he didn't see you, Itachi, he'll just betray himself."

Itachi nodded. "Yeah, that's true. Look, Jered. Haro's right. It will be better for you if you just let them know that you saw me. No one would expect you to be able to detain a team of Genin, especially if you didn't know. You can tell them you tried to lock us in this office until they got back, but we overpowered you and got away."

"Okay," Jered said. He seemed relieved that he wouldn't have to lie, and even more excited.

"Maybe we should leave him tied up?" Haro suggested. "And gagged. Otherwise he'll have to raise an alarm. It would be strange if he didn't, and any ruckus might actually prevent us from escaping."

Jered immediately consented to being tied up and gagged, almost bouncing in his chair with eagerness. He grinned extra wide when it was Amaya who stepped up to the task. He stared at her with a kind of avid fascination as he arranged himself comfortably in one of the conference chairs. Amaya used ninja twine from her pack to tie him down. She also tied the chair to the table. For a gag, Jered suggested the sleeve of his shirt. Amaya cut it right off his arm with a kunai knife, smirking at him all the while.

"Wait," Jered said as she folded the material lengthwise. "Do you have those little star knives?" he asked in a quick burst. "Can I have one? Just to keep?"

Amaya laughed. Haro removed a shuriken from his pouch and tossed it into the wall behind Jered's head, just above his ear. Jered froze in the chair.

"Now hold still!" Amaya said, still chortling, and fitted the gag between Jered's teeth before trying it behind his head. She stepped back when she finished. "Are you okay?" she asked. "Comfortable?"

Jered nodded.

"All right," Haro said. "Let's get out of here. I don't fancy running into a dozen or more Grass Ninja."

They conversed in low voices about the best way of getting out.

Haro wanted to make an army of clones and rush the guards in a melee attack. Itachi and Amaya acknowledged that the strategy would probably work, but would draw too much attention from the streets. The whole point was to get out without a lot of excitement.

"Besides," Amaya whispered. "If this Gehard is the one who hired the Grass Ninja, and if we play it cool, we might be able to remain here long enough to learn where they've got Sakura. If we can't spring her by ourselves, we can at least send a message to Konoha and lie low until help arrives."

Haro nodded thoughtfully.

"Genjutsu would be perfect," Itachi muttered. Too bad none of them had learned how to do one yet.

"A diversion will work just as well," Amaya said. "We can cause a commotion. First, you two should assume the identities of those bank officials. I'll mimic one of the guards. That will give us the edge of surprise if nothing else. They won't attack immediately. My White Star jutsu should take care of the rest. No one outside the bank will see a thing."

Once they were in agreement, they stepped back from each other and formed signs for the transformation jutsu. From his seat in the chair against the wall, Jered's eyes widened. He watched, silent behind the gag, as three simultaneous bursts of chakra resulted in three grown men standing where three Genin used to.

As usual, it was Amaya they depended on the most. She gathered her chakra, twisting it around her shuriken and kunai knives like twine, somehow managing to balance that against maintaining the transformation as she had during the Genin test. When she nodded that she was ready, Haro pulled open the door and ducked through. Itachi followed quickly on his heels.

Itachi and Haro walked side by side across the plaza, heading straight for the door. Behind the counter, the other bank official they had seen upon entering lifted his head. He did a double take as his boss and someone wearing his own face walked right past him.

He didn't get a word out.

Amaya darted out into the plaza behind them. From her hands, a shower of shuriken cut through the air, each bound to a thread of chakra that burst in a blinding white flash as it whizzed past them. The bank official let out a shout and ducked behind the desk.

The guards at the doors rushed inside. Itachi and Haro met them head on. They skidded to a halt, baffled that the bank officials appeared to be rushing for the outside doors. Itachi had learned enough of taijutsu that he was able to twist out of the way of the first guard and disable him from behind with a blow to the kidneys. Haro did the same to the second guard, though a little more gracefully. Leaving two full grown men face down on the ground behind them, they sprang for the outside.

A second burst of white light enveloped the area behind them. Haro and Itachi ducked out the doors. Amaya followed hard on their heels, shuriken booming behind her in a third volley of lights. She sagged as soon as she crossed the threshold.

Haro caught her by the arm. "We need to move!" he said to Itachi, half supporting Amaya as they hurried down the steps. Itachi led the way, bounding off the last step and into a dark alley that cut across two streets. Amaya and Haro followed. Once they were off the steps, all three of them released the transformation jutsu.

"Now what?" Haro gasped. "This isn't safe."

Amaya still seemed out of breath. Her head hung over the ground. She had probably done that White Star jutsu too many times. Itachi hadn't even known she could do it in successive waves like that.

"Is anyone following?" Itachi asked. No one seemed to be, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Amaya lifted her head. Her face was little pale, but she seemed all right otherwise. "We should double back," she said. "When we first arrived, I spotted an alcove where the road turns sharply on the

other side of the bank. From the alley, we'd be able to watch for departures and arrivals without being seen."

"If the Grass Ninja are working for this Gehard guy," Haro said, "they might come here. We can learn how many we're up against."

Itachi nodded. It was risky, but it might be worth it.

They continued through the alleyway and cut across the busy street on the other end, removing their headbands again as they went. Blending with the crowd, they threaded their way down a street parallel to the bank a few blocks up and circled around to it again from the other side. They slipped into the alleyway adjacent to the bank from a distance away, scouting the area for trouble, hearts beating fast.

Itachi was grateful for dusk. Shadows spilling across the street created pockets of darkness. When no one was looking, they stole into the alcove Amaya had seen—a sort of narrowed alleyway that bent at an odd angle, making it nearly invisible from the street facing the bank. They holed up on one end, each of them turned a slightly different direction to watch for anyone who might be tracking them.

Itachi watched the bank. For a few minutes nothing happened. Then the guards reemerged, seemingly unharmed, but twice as tense than they had been before.

Itachi let out a slow breath. They hadn't seriously hurt anyone, and Jered had probably been released. He just hoped the bank official would still deliver their message. He probably would. Banks were unlikely to pit themselves between ninja factions. It would be best for them to just do the job. In the meantime…

There wasn't any warning.

One second, Itachi was breathing night air, thinking about their chances and what to do if the Grass Ninja didn't show. The next he was on the ground, back flat on the pavement, staring up with blurry

eyes at a sky that seemed to be spinning in circles. A second of processing alerted him that Amaya and Haro were down beside him. Haro was groaning. Amaya coughed.

Standing over them was Sakura.

"What did you do with the scroll?"

Itachi opened his mouth to respond, but only a wheeze escaped his lips.

"Healing first!" Amaya coughed. "So we know you're really Sakura."

Itachi blinked slowly, head ringing. He hadn't even thought of that.

"Well, at least one of you has sense," Sakura muttered.

Reaching down, she wrapped both hands around Amaya's wrist and hoisted the girl to her feet. Itachi couldn't see the healing, but when it was his turn to be lifted, Amaya was smiling. Itachi didn't really need to be healed—a little lost wind never really hurt anyone—but he accepted Sakura's chakra to affirm for himself that it really was her. When it was done, he had no doubts. No one could mould healing chakra like Sakura. Her chakra was distinctive, and he had felt it before.

"The scroll is in the bank," Itachi told her. "I thought it best."

"Hmm," Sakura said, but she seemed to relax. "I've already been to see the magistrate. I told him we had a complication so he'll be expecting a missive. The scroll was supposed to go to him, but the bank is well enough. He can pick it up there."

"There's something else you should know," Itachi said.

"Yeah," Haro seconded. "The Grass Ninja we ran into are working for someone Itachi knows!"

Sakura's face paled. "I want you to tell me everything, but right now we have to run. This place is about to be crawling with enemies, and word will spread. We have to let the Hokage know right away what happened!"

Lucia had heard three versions of events before Sakura returned to the village with her son.

The first time the Hokage summoned her, it was to inform her that news had arrived that a Genin Team from Konoha had failed a mission, were captured by Grass Ninja following an unspecified conflict, and awaiting bail in New Spring City.

This missive came to the village by way of a carrier pigeon from some unnamed person. A ninja by the name of Shikamaru—an advisor of the Hokage apparently—warned her that the information might be unreliable, and that verification had been requested of New Spring City.

A response came from the magistrate himself. There were no Leaf Ninja being held captive anywhere in the Land of Rivers, it said, but the scroll had arrived safely and had been delivered to the feudal lords. Konoha would be paid in full. Lucia relaxed a little when that news was relayed to her, until she learned that the note mentioned that no Genin were seen at all, only Sakura Haruno.

The third missive caused a lump of ice to form in her stomach. Again, she was summoned to the Hokage's office. The advisor was there again, and this time, they locked her in the room with them before explaining.

A messenger had arrived from the Village Hidden in the Grass with a missive from the Grass, demanding that the Hokage turn over any information about Lucia Van Alstyne and children Itachi and Rina. It read that Itachi Van Alstyne had apparently been spotted in New Spring City. It also said that Lucia was wanted for unspecified crimes

and demanded that she be handed over. Surprisingly, Naruto let her read the entire message for herself.

She handed the message back when she finished. "I don't know what that's about, except that Gehard must be behind it."

"Don't worry about it," Shikamaru told her, *yawning* while he talked. "This kind of thing happens all the time. It's a conflict of interest. They've been paid to find and deliver you. We're harboring you. They learned you're here and now they want to see how we react if they lay grounds for suspicion against you."

"We're not turning you over to the Grass," Naruto told her. "I already sent their messenger back."

"However," Shikamaru said. "It is a bit strange. We have good relations with the Grass. Either they believe you are very guilty of something, or your husband is paying them a lot of money not to care."

"Probably both," Lucia responded. "Who knows what he told them?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "At this point, it's his word against yours. We'll see how they answer."

Not a man given to excitement. Lucia appreciated that Naruto had some level-headed people for counselors. Gehard often relied on bullying to get his way quickly. Some people would break—or overreact—to the flimsiest evidence if it was shouted aggressively enough, especially if it came with a bounty. Even so, she could not rest easy. She noticed that Shikamaru didn't say he trusted her word anymore than Gehard's. That was wise, but it also made her position more precarious.

So they waited.

Sakura returned with Itachi and his two teammates before the Grass responded. By that time, everyone in the village seemed to be

waiting for her arrival. Rumor about the Grass messenger had spread through the town and everyone seemed to know that Sakura's mission had something to do with it.

Sakura went straight to the Hokage, bringing all three Genin with her to be debriefed.

Lucia was summoned not long after. She arrived in the Hokage's office to find her son standing against the wall beside his teacher with the rest of his team, looking hot and sweaty and a little spooked, but blessedly healthy for all of that.

Shikamaru lounged against the windowsill behind Naruto's desk, arms crossed, looking bored. His presence seemed to her to indicate a political situation, or a military one, in which the Hokage needed advice. At least, she had not seen him when her business with the Hokage was mostly domestic. Lucia did not think the man was actually bored.

Everyone was silent when Lucia entered. The Hokage invited her to sit down.

Lucia listened as the events of the mission were described to her. Her son's team had been attacked in the forest by Grass Ninja. Gehard had brought families from her home town to this country; they were staying in New Spring City. They working with the Grass Ninja. And they had a plan to lure her out.

That other families had come with Gehard to these lands did not surprise Lucia. A number of families owed Gehard debts, or were owed debts by him, and several had grudges against her; the Lassens were in that last group. They might want to keep an eye on Gehard's doings, and it might benefit them to assist him in some ways. The only thing that surprised her was that Jered Lassen had apparently helped her son.

"We think your husband is definitely working with the Grass," the Hokage informed her, "and that they've identified your son as a

Genin for the Leaf. The attack may not have been about him, but they know he's here now. And you as well."

"I hope you know it's not my intention to pit you against other villages," Lucia told him.

"I do," Naruto said.

Shikamaru sighed. "There's no reason to get too excited. This matter is unlikely to come to open conflict. The Grass can't defeat the Leaf and it would not serve us to attack them. However, this issue has the potential to sour relations. We would like to resolve it as soon as possible."

"Itachi can't leave the village for the time being," the Hokage said. "I've already explained it to him. Neither can you."

"I see," Lucia said.

Shikamaru nodded. "It's a drag to have to hold Team Four back, especially as this mission—their first—will be seen as a failure by some. It has brought the village under suspicion."

Lucia glanced at her son. His eyes were on the floor in front of his feet.

She took a good look at his teammates too: the girl—Amaya—and the boy—Haro. Amaya was a delicate looking thing, but she had the curves of a grown woman and a look about her face that suggested she was doing her best to behave as old as she looked. Haro had an open and honest face, with bright eyes and a sturdy build. He hovered close to the girl, almost without seeming to realize it, while Amaya had turned slightly in Itach's direction. Lucia pursed her lips. That was a conflict for another time.

"Rumor about this has spread," the Hokage told her, "and will take a little time to sort out. There might be some hostility toward your family."

Lucia didn't react. That was nothing new.

"It's a bit of a mess," Shikamaru continued. "The carrier that brought the message from the Grass apparently talked to others about your son. Seeds were spread that an outsider masquerading as a Leaf Genin does injury to the Leaf's reputation."

"That might be Gehard's intention too," Lucia murmured. "I would be unsurprised if he was behind that first message you received as well as the last. Dissention is a useful tool against a stronger enemy."

"I thought of that," Shikamaru said. "And for what it's worth, I think your son behaved smartly on this mission, given what happened. The team stayed together and completed the task assigned to them. He hasn't incurred any penalty. Still, he wasn't accepted by everyone to begin with, so having returned from his first mission with less than a glowing report is a strike against him. We'll do what we can to mitigate."

A knock sounded at the door. "Lord Hokage?"

"Come in," Naruto said.

Konohamaru popped his head into the room. "We've got a problem."

Shikamaru rolled his eyes to the ceiling and sighed. It seemed to Lucia as if he had expected this interruption, if perhaps not so swiftly.

Konohamaru glanced at Itachi, who had looked up at the sound of his previous teacher's voice, his face pale. Konohamaru spoke. "Yukio has just issued a challenge against you, Itachi."

Amaya gasped.

Lucia felt cold. "A challenge? What does that mean?"

Naruto leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Yukio, hmm. Did he give a reason?"

"He heard the boy's mission was a failure and that Konoha is disgraced. I told him it was exaggerated, not true even, but he's fired up. It's posted already. I took down the proclamation from the board, but at least a handful of people have seen it."

"Please explain this to me," Lucia demanded.

"It's a fight," Naruto said. "I challenged Sasuke recently if you remember. Anyone can challenge anyone at an equal level, though Genin are required to have been on at least one C-rank mission or higher to be considered eligible."

"I feared this might happen," Shikamaru muttered. "Yukio wanting to fight Itachi is unusual. There's little precedent for someone of Yukio's rare ability challenging someone with hardly any training at all. If it were anyone other than Yukio, it might be good to have a demonstration, but Yukio will make your son look like a failure."

"Maybe," Naruto said stubbornly. "People said the same about me."

"Can my son refuse?" Lucia demanded.

"Sure," Naruto said, "but Genin usually don't. Even if they know they'll lose, it's considered a weakness not to fight."

"It will confirm the rumors if he refuses," Shikamaru said. "That he's masquerading as a Genin, I mean."

Lucia looked at her son. His face was drained of color. His teammates looked a little sick as well.

"I have to fight him," Itachi said. "I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"Yukio will pulverize you!" Amaya hissed at him.

"If I don't do it, I'm a coward," Itachi said. He swayed on his feet. "I have to accept."

"Don't be stupid," Haro said. "There are some rules to matches, but not many! You haven't even seen one yet. A Hokage exhibition doesn't count. Most Genin don't fight to kill, but Yukio's not most Genin. He might really try to kill you."

"Not on purpose," Naruto said hastily. "I know Yukio. He's a tough fighter, but he's not vicious, just advanced. He won't go easy on you, though. You could get pretty damaged."

Lucia closed her eyes. She couldn't interfere. She saw the answer as clearly as her son. If he didn't fight, he'd lose credibility.

"It's not even sport, though!" Haro said. He sounded furious. "Itachi, you don't know *any* attack jutsu and very little defense. Yukio is the best in class! It's not fair. He just wants to humiliate you. Maybe he won't kill you, but he'll try to get you to quit the ninja life! If you come out unable to walk, he'll think it's a victory for the village."

"An instructor can step in at any time," Sakura said. "It won't be that bad."

"Too quickly and that's the same as not fighting at all!" Haro objected. "Yukio will only need *one* move to crush Itachi."

"Ask for a delay, Itachi," Sakura urged. "Some time to train. That's permitted. Yukio has to accept."

Lucia forced herself to open her eyes. If Itachi lost, he lost. That didn't worry Lucia. But there was a difference between losing and being brutally beaten.

"Sakura's right," Naruto said. "You should ask for some time to train at the very least. A month is typical, though it goes by fast. Against Yukio, you'll need everything: attack ninjutsu, genjutsu, taijutsu."

"It's no good," Haro groaned. "Even if he had a year…"He stopped mid-sentence, eyes widening. "Wait! I've got an idea. What if-" He licked his lips. "What if our team fought Yukio's team? Three on three

instead of one on one? Yukio will still get his shot, but he'll at least have to get around us first."

Amaya's head whipped around to stare at Haro. "That's brilliant! Yukio will agree to that."

Itachi nodded jerkily. He seemed too overcome to speak.

Naruto looked pleased.

"We're still going to get pulverized, though," Haro muttered. "I mean, I wanted to fight Yukio myself, but not yet. And with Michiko and Jumei on his team—let's face it: we can't win. The best we can do is put up a fight, and maybe not much of one."

Lucia didn't say anything. She didn't know the kids. What she knew was that Amaya and Haro putting up a fight wouldn't save her son from a humiliating defeat. Though it comforted her that he might have some support, Itachi had to do it on his own.

Shikamaru seemed to see that too. "That's good of you, but I don't know how much it will really help."

Amaya's eyes were shining. "What if Itachi activated his Sharingan? He could learn jutsu fast enough then! He could be our trump card. No one would suspect it."

Haro frowned at her. "We don't even know if he has one."

"I think he does," Amaya said. "I think I saw it. When he was reading that table."

"I was just crunching numbers," Itachi objected. "Sharingan is a fighting jutsu. You said it was just the firelight-"

"I know," Amaya said. "It might have been a trick of the light, but for a second, I really thought I saw it. Red eyes, with one black fleck. The Sharingan is used in fighting, but who knows why it activates? We were all on adrenaline from being attacked, and you're not a typical

ninja. Maybe numbers work for you. It's worth trying. At the very least, if you *tried* to activate it…"

The Hokage jumped to his feet. His eyes were shining. He grinned. "Even if you can't get it to activate," he said eagerly, "I might be able to get you some help."

"Sasuke already said *no* , Naruto," Sakura said to him. "Don't look at me like that. I can tell what you're thinking! And yes, it would be helpful if he agreed since they probably have similar abilities, but I can tell you right now that Sasuke isn't going to care about this development. He wants nothing to do with Itachi. He'll be pleased if Yukio *does* make him quit."

Naruto looked at Lucia. The light in his brilliant blue eyes had a significance to them. He grinned. She started, remembering what the Hokage had told her about Sasuke being disciplined for his unlawful entrance into her home.

Naruto slammed a hand down on the desk. "I'm the Hokage," he said. "And Sasuke owes me a favor."

Lucia nodded slowly.

Itachi sagged against the wall.

TBC

A big **THANK YOU** to people who reviewed Chapter 10. They are **: Sparklecakes, Miss sweetie, insaneteacup, Aishuu, pink-strawberries, Crimson Marionette, Lifestyle, First Weaver, Lukinator, zhusanna, Ruby Rita, Hurricane Anna, Ladyrouge214, Melodi Moon, The Violent Tomboy, Dark Inu Fan, IronPen, IVlaedhros, greyspell, spoiltdreams, HeroineInducedPanic, the AWESOMEST One (), Whillenwolf, Kondou Akito.**

Are these people who reviewed prior to chapter 10 still reading? Or did I lose you? **Rin-elwin, Evanescent Luminaire, QueenofHalf-**

BakedIdeas, Helena, Satoshii, Dualhunters, AD9, Achor, Bluetopaz, AriesRacoonRebi, Shadowheart251, suddon, Regin, Persephonii, DreamWriter23, First Lady Aya, Niana Kuonji, Araine, Sacha Michel, iTravel, Candelabra, Joey's-mine, pinklove.

Thank you very much to all my readers! I read your reviews as they come in and again for inspiration and insight when I start a new chapter. Thank you all very much.

Chapter 12

I'm going to politely ignore what is going down with Sasuke in the manga of late. This story is the (…alternative…) future. Sorry for the delay! Hope you enjoy this chapter!

Warnings : This fanfic is for 16+ readers (rated M). It contains sexual references , mature themes (including sado-masochism...described vaguely but not "shown"), some violence, a very little bit of swearing, and other material. , This fic FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES for this site so please do not report it as MA. There are no explicit sex scenes. All such scenes "cut off" before anything happens. Violence is typical for a story about ninjas. There isn't anything extremely disturbing described in any detail.

White Rain

Chapter 12

By Zapenstap

Itachi vaulted down the stairs, catching air on the last four steps. He broke into a run the second his feet hit the earth.

Amaya and Haro burst out the doors of the Hokage's office behind him, throwing shouts at his back.

"Itachi!"

"Where are you going?"

He heard them, but he didn't stop. He couldn't. He knew he had surprised his mother and the Hokage as much as his team by bursting out of the room, but hearing that Yukio had declared a fight wasn't enough. He had to find out if it was true. And he had to answer.

He bolted across the street, slipped around buildings, and ducked down alleyways until he reached the Academy grounds by the most direct path possible. Plush grass softened his footfalls, but didn't slow him down as pelted through the shaded grove leading to the school doors. Startled Academy students jumped out of the way. The doors to the school were open, but the hallways inside were packed.

"Excuse me," Itachi said, pushing his way past the first row of Academy students.

He squeezed by Genin from his class, and classes that had graduated before his. There were even some Chuunin milling among the crowds, some of them pretending to supervise Academy students or Genin, others unabashedly hanging around just to see what would happen. They had gathered here because of him.

He knew it, because everyone was clustered around the Fight Board.

The Fight Board wasn't anything special. It was just a bulletin board made of cork and wood that hung on the wall beside Iruka's office. But it was the official place to post challenges to other students in equal standing.

Upon recognizing him, the other ninja students divided to let him through. Itachi slowed as he passed through the crowd, stopping only when he reached the board. His eyes scanned it top to bottom. No declaration from Yukio was posted. But he had been told it had been there. Konohamaru must have removed it , or Iruka had, but clearly not before most people saw or there wouldn't be so many kids hanging around. They were waiting to see what the Hokage said about it. No. They're waiting to see what Itachi said .

Behind him, he could hear the kids in the hall whispering to each other. He couldn't make out the words, but he could guess. Was Yukio really serious? Would Itachi accept or decline? Would it be a public match?

Some matches were private, waged on the practice grounds with Jounin in attendance to supervise. Others were more official and took place in the arena where the Chuunin exams and exhibition matches between Jounin were fought. Those matches were usually open to a crowd. Itachi had no doubt what sort of match Yukio would lobby for, probably with the whole village in attendance.

Itachi knocked on the door to Iruka's office. "Iruka Sensei? It's Itachi." He barely waited for the murmured approval before pushing the door open. Slipping inside, he shut it behind him and leaned against it, breathing deeply.

Iruka looked up from his desk. "I suppose you're here about Yukio's challenge."

Itachi nodded.

"You don't have to accept," Iruka told him. "Yukio insisted he had the right to challenge you, and he does technically, but it's not very sporting of him. Everyone will understand if you—"

"I'm accepting," Itachi broke in.

Iruka looked surprised.

Itachi straightened against the door. "If I don't, it will just give credence to what everyone is saying about me. Even if he beats me to a pulp, it's better than what will happen if I refuse to fight."

Iruka leaned back in his chair, a troubled expression on his face. "He might really beat you to a pulp, Itachi. Yukio has an attitude problem, but he is very bright and very gifted—the best in many years."

Itachi knew all of that. "All the more reason to prove to him and everyone else that I deserve to be part of this village."

A thud from the other side of the door jolted Itachi in the back.

"Let us in, Itachi!" It was Haro's voice. "Or I'll kick the door down, I swear it!"

Itachi whirled away from the door. Amaya and Haro shoved their way into the office, half-clambering over each other like kittens—ferocious kittens. It seemed that the crowd in the hallway was growing larger. Once inside, they shut the door as Itachi had done, and turned to face him as a united front. Haro looked hopping mad, not that that was unusual, but it was Amaya who laid into him.

"Why did you come without us?" Amaya demanded. "Did you hear anything I said?" Before Itachi could reply, she turned to Iruka. "Iruka Sensei, we want to fight Yukio as a team. Our team against Yukio's team. It evens the odds a little."

"And a month to train," Haro chimed in. "The Hokage said we could ask for a month."

Iruka raised his eyebrows at Itachi. "Is this correct?"

Itachi nodded. "If Yukio will agree, we'll fight as a team." He turned to Amaya and Haro. "Sorry," he whispered. "I wasn't trying to ditch you guys. I just…had to get here first."

Iruka shook his head. "If you three are sure, I'll talk to Yukio, and his team. I'll post the result this afternoon."

Itachi swallowed. "Thanks," he said, and opened the door to let himself out. "Thanks a lot."

Amaya and Haro followed him out into the hallway.

The chatter fell silent.

Itachi faced a crowd of bright young faces, some barely toddlers and others in their teen years. They stood in clusters, watching him without moving, waiting for him to make an announcement. One face in particular sent a jolt through him.

Rina.

His little sister stood against the back wall, alone, her arms wrapped around her book bag. She stared at him, clothed in her academy gear. He hadn't seen her since he left on his mission, not since he had knocked on her door and apologized for leaving her after he went to talk to Sasuke. He wondered what rumors she had been hearing, and what she was thinking now. But she was just one face in a sea of anxious faces, all of them expecting an answer.

He thought quickly.

"The terms of the fight will be posted this afternoon," he announced.

The hallway exploded with voices. The reaction ranged from grim mutterings to excited babble. He had made one thing clear. There was to be a fight.

Rina didn't react at all-outwardly. She just looked at him, eyes like black pools. She was a difficult kid to read and he couldn't decide what she was thinking. Was she calm because she had faith in him? Or was she steeling herself? Or did she just not understand? Or not care?

He pushed through the crowd toward her. Amaya and Haro followed behind him. Rina's eyes drifted to his teammates as he approached. Again, her feelings were hard to interpret.

"Hey," he said to her. "I'm back. And I'm fine. Did mom tell you?"

She nodded, not saying anything.

Itachi gestured to Haro and Amaya. "Rina, these are my teammates, Haro and Amaya. Guys, this is my sister, Rina. I don't think I've introduced you yet."

"Hi," Amaya said pleasantly. Haro echoed her.

Rina nodded to them both. She spoke to Itachi. "You're going to fight?"

"I'm going to fight this kid named Yukio," he told her. "He's in my grade. Don't tell anyone this before it's posted, but it's supposed to be my whole team against his whole team. I get a month to train. And Sasuke is going to train me. Hopefully. The Hokage said he would."

She took his plan in calmly, her eyes drifting to the lower right as she thought. "Sasuke is depressed," she said.

Itachi blinked at her. Haro and Amaya exchanged puzzled glances.

"What do you mean?" Itachi asked. "You didn't go over there without me, did you? You didn't speak to him?"

She shook her head.

He relaxed. "Okay. Good. Then how do you know?"

She just shrugged.

Itachi let it go. Sometimes it was useless to badger her for answers. Rina could be very secretive when she wanted to be. Maybe she had been watching Sasuke while he was gone. He wouldn't put that past her. Maybe she was bored.

"I'm going to try to talk to him again," Itachi said, taking a deep breath as he said it. "Sasuke owes Naruto a favor, but I'd rather he wasn't forced into it. Besides, I have an idea. A different idea than from before."

"You asked once already?" Haro asked him.

"And he turned you down?" Amaya added. "But you're his nephew, right? You'd think he would *want* you to succeed."

Itachi hadn't told them about that confrontation. The mission had pushed it out of his mind, exactly as he had wanted, but it was no use running from it now. He didn't have much time. "Sasuke doesn't want anything to do with me," he explained. "He doesn't see me as his nephew, or even as a ninja. He sees me the way Yukio does, as an outsider, only I'm more of a personal annoyance because I remind him of his brother. He doesn't like my mother much either."

Amaya's mouth twisted.

"So what are you going to do?" Haro asked.

"Well, I think I took the wrong approach last time I talked to him," he said. "I tried to get him to see me as family, and he… really hated that. But I realized something on our mission. Trying to be an Uchiha is a bit beyond me, at least right now. I just need a teacher."

"Do you want us to come with you?" Amaya asked him.

Itachi shook his head. "No. I think I'll talk to him alone."

Rina's expression changed, her mouth and eyebrows scrunching in such a way that he knew there was no chance of leaving her behind. If he did, she would just trail behind him, probably kicking rocks at his heels the whole way.

"Rina can come with me," he amended, "since she's family." His sister smiled. She swung her book bag over one shoulder and moved to stand beside him, facing Amaya and Haro.

Haro turned to Amaya. "We need to think about how to beat Yukio's team. Since Itachi has to pack a year's worth of skill building into a month, you and I should be the ones strategizing. We know Yukio better. We can start with what we've got and add in what Itachi learns as we go."

Amaya nodded thoughtfully. "You and I can improve our skills in a month's time too, if we train hard enough. Itachi can join us when

he's not with Sasuke. Maybe Sakura will help."

"Every day," Haro agreed. "If we're going up against Yukio, not to mention Michiko and Jumei, then it'll have to be training all day every day."

"We'll need really good teamwork," Amaya agreed.

Itachi took a deep breath. That settled it. Time was already dwindling. If Amaya and Haro were going to start today, committing so much to *his* fight, then he had no excuse not to start training as soon as possible. They were counting on him to do his best. More than his best.

But first he had to get Sasuke to agree to train him. No time like the present.

He looked at Rina. "Ready?"

She nodded.

Ino didn't know what to do.

"Sakura," she whispered, crouching down beside where Sakura had curled up on the floor, weeping.

Ino laid a gentle hand on her friend's upper back, but Sakura hardly seemed aware of her presence.

She hadn't called Ino for help. Running into her had been an accident. That was just like Sakura.

Ino came to the hospital almost every day to assist since she wasn't currently active for missions. Today she had stumbled across Sakura, looking pale as a sheet, standing like a zombie in the hallway with a piece of paper in her hands. The last Ino had heard,

Sakura was meeting with Naruto about the mission the whole village was buzzing about.

Had she been injured?

Ino had taken the piece of paper out of Sakura's limp fingers and carefully read the numbers. It was the write up from a blood test.

Ino guided her friend into an empty room in the patient ward. There was a bed by the window, but the second Ino shut the door, Sakura had fallen to the floor in a heap.

"Sakura," Ino whispered. "It's okay. It will be fine."

Sakura turned her tear-streaked face toward Ino, scrubbing the back of her hand across her eyes. "How?" she said fiercely. "He doesn't want a child. He's made that very clear! And I—" She squeezed her eyes shut. "What am I going to do? What am I going to do?"

Sasuke stared out the open window, his elbows draped over the sill, watching the road. The skies were blue, the clouds white, and a gentle breeze stirred the hair on his forehead. Sunlight streamed across his bare arms. It was warm out today, but he couldn't quite feel it.

He had heard that Sakura had returned from her mission. He had also heard the rumors about how she had been waylaid by Grass Ninja on a routine transport to the Land of Rivers. It didn't matter. She was safe now. He just wanted to see her.

He couldn't stop thinking how they had left things.

She wants a family. She loves me, but she wants a family.

She was his family. Now. Her and Naruto and Kakashi and… He closed his eyes. That much had been so difficult. It was difficult every

day. It was all he could handle. Having children just seemed like a really bad idea.

But Sakura wanted children. The thought of never having them was making her unhappy. What was he to do? There didn't seem to be a solution. Well, at least they had time.

While he was thinking of what he would say to her, two figures emerged from behind the trees, coming toward him from down the road.

Neither was Sakura.

It was Naruto. And Shikamaru.

He got up from his seat by the window and let himself out the door to the front porch. He reminded himself not to be cold. The habit was ingrained—a coping mechanism so he wouldn't fall to pieces. He constantly had to remind himself.

Naruto approached him with a smile and a wave. Shikamaru looked deceptively bored.

"What's going on?" he asked when they reached him.

"Got some stuff to talk about," Naruto told him. "Let's go inside."

Sasuke let them in. The place wasn't kept as neatly as it could have been. He had left things out over the days he was alone, though it wasn't a mess. Naruto didn't seem to notice, probably because he lived in a sty half the time. Shikamaru glanced only at the bundle of flowers—wilting now—in a vase on the table. Sasuke had never determined who sent them. Ino perhaps. He hadn't asked.

"Where's Sakura?" he asked.

"She said she wanted to get checked out at the hospital," Naruto told him, turning around with his hands behind his head. "I invited her to

come, but she was really insistent. She said to tell you that she'll see you later and not to worry, though."

"Is she hurt?" he asked.

"Not that I saw, but you know Sakura. She likes to be thorough."

Sasuke didn't reply. He did know Sakura and he wasn't sure it added up. Was she avoiding him? Sakura was a medic. She would know if an injury was worth checking out enough for the hospital to be the first place to go upon returning. Maybe she was injured seriously and didn't want to alarm Naruto. If she went for a casual reason, he couldn't help but think that she just wasn't ready to see him. She had to know he was waiting.

Or maybe she just didn't want to see him with Naruto and Shikamaru tagging along? He held onto that hope.

"What stuff did you come to talk about?" he asked, pushing Sakura out of his mind. His eyes slid to Shikamaru. If he was here, this wasn't likely to be a social visit. He had heard rumors about complications around Sakura's mission, which, as near as he could figure, seemed to be Lucia's fault. "Did you find out something about that woman?"

"Hmm," Naruto said. "We have a bit of problem with The Grass. They've sent a missive demanding we hand over Lucia and her kids. It seems Gehard and his people have contracted with them. What's more, they've learned that her son has been admitted as a Genin. They aren't pleased."

Sasuke grunted. "And?" he asked. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," Naruto said.

Sasuke scowled.

"Nothing right *now* ," Shikamaru amended. "It wouldn't be prudent until we know more. Lucia handled the news very stoically, I might add. The Grass messenger was pretty aggressive that we turn her over. Seems they're being paid a lot. Didn't seem to faze her at all."

"Ah," Naruto agreed. "Either she really does trust us, or she has something else up her sleeve."

"Or she's very good at dissembling," Shikamaru added. "Possibly all three."

Sasuke just shook his head. He prickled just at hearing that conniving woman's name. She was a user, and cold as ice about it. He hated people like that. "You keep telling me you're investigating her. Have you learned anything?"

"Nothing reliable," Shikamaru said. "We have reports of people maybe having seen her, years ago, but no solid leads on anything she did here or why. In ten years, the trail has gone cold. Whoever she is, she's done a very good job covering her tracks."

"Then push harder," Sasuke suggested. "Someone must know something. Maybe we're looking in the wrong places."

"That's what I thought," Naruto said. "I want you to know that I've sent someone *very* good to do a thorough investigation. Awhile ago actually. He might be there by now."

Sasuke frowned at him. "Where?"

"Her country."

Sasuke blinked. It was so far. Too far for a messenger bird even. Whoever Naruto sent would have to remain there long enough to ensure whatever intelligence they picked up was both accurate and worth the trip. Then they would have to travel all the way back. It could be weeks before they heard anything.

"We wanted the truth," Shikamaru said, "from the source. Not just on Lucia, but on this Gehard guy too, and any related business. It will take more time, but it will be worth it. Since Lucia is not a ninja, the contacts we rely on for intelligence around here haven't been much help. If anyone does know anything more, they aren't talking."

"Who did you send?"

"Kakashi."

Interesting. That explained why Sasuke hadn't seen him lately.

Shikamaru chewed on the toothpick between his teeth. "The question is whether he'll run into Gehard, who apparently has gone back too, or if they'll miss each other."

"Kakashi can take care of himself," Sasuke said.

"Of course, but I'd prefer Gehard doesn't know there is an investigation in his home country."

Sasuke nodded. That made sense. He wondered how quiet Kakashi himself would keep, or if he would have any warning that Gehard had returned home. "Keep me informed," he requested.

Shikamaru nodded absently.

Naruto sighed. "If you don't mind, Shikamaru, I'd like to talk to Sasuke alone."

Shikamaru shrugged. "I'll head back then. I have a few more questions for Lucia. Find me when you're done." Fingers threaded behind his neck, he walked casually out the door.

Naruto waited until he was gone. "Did you hear about the fight?" he asked Sasuke.

Sasuke frowned at him. "No. What fight?"

"Yukio has challenged Itachi to a match."

Sasuke felt a ping of surprise. He wasn't familiar with the Leaf's current roster of ninja students, having little to do with them most of the time, but he had heard of Yukio. "Why?"

"Because he's an outsider. The Grass Ninja that brought the message regarding Lucia talked to a number of people about how the Leaf has let a non-ninja, with potentially dangerous connections, into the ranks. Some think it reflects badly on the village."

"Well, I agree with that assessment," Sasuke told him pointedly. "It's your call to let them stay here, but they aren't ninja in my reckoning. That kid and his sister shouldn't be part of the Leaf."

"And I have a different opinion," Naruto said, "which we've already discussed."

"Fine. You're Hokage. What do you want from me then?"

"I'm not asking you to get involved in the politics," Naruto told him. "I know you don't agree with me. But Itachi is doing well. Just not well enough. He's behind, and Yukio is a ferocious fighter. If you—"

"Stop," Sasuke said, holding up both hands. "I just told you I don't even think he should be a Genin. I have told *him* I have no interest in training him. If you're about to ask me on his behalf, don't."

Naruto face settled into a stubborn shape. Sasuke braced himself. Naruto's stubbornness was one of his more infamous qualities, but Sasuke was just as stubborn. Naruto knew that better than anyone. Simply asking again and again wouldn't make him change his mind.

"I'm not asking you on his behalf," Naruto said. "You owe me a debt for threatening Lucia."

"You're going to force me?"

"I can't force you. I'm telling you that you can cancel the debt by training Lucia's kid for *one* match. What you do after that is up to you."

Sasuke wanted to laugh, but he couldn't muster up a sense of humor. Naruto had to be thinking that this…trap…would somehow endear him to the kid. Sasuke couldn't help feeling that Naruto was mistaken, but the kid would be the one to suffer for it. "And if I refuse?"

"You'll still owe me a debt. The kid will probably lose the match."

"That's not enough of a reason to agree. I don't care if he loses."

Naruto shrugged. "I don't want you to agree because of a consequence. I just think you should give him a chance. And I think he deserves a chance against Yukio. Besides which, since the reason you owe me is because you threatened them, it seems fitting. That's all."

Sasuke frowned. He understood Naruto's reasoning. But did Naruto understand why he didn't want a 'new Itachi' in his life? Merely entertaining the thought was painful. Better to just stay out of the kid's way.

"No," he concluded. "I—"

They were interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Sasuke?" The voice was Itachi's.

Naruto shared a baffled look with Sasuke.

"Did you send him here?" Sasuke demanded in quiet voice.

Naruto shook his head.

Sasuke walked past Naruto to open the door.

The face that looked up into his still gave Sasuke a sense of shock. It was a young face, fresh and full of hope and earnestness, but it was still his brother's face. The boy wore ninja gear, and a Konoha headband, adding further to Sasuke's disconcertion.

He wasn't alone, either. As the last time Sasuke had confronted the boy, his sister was with him, standing silently a few paces behind Itachi, her dark eyes fixed on Sasuke. Those eyes gave him pause. Though there was no proof she was related to him at all, her eyes looked like Uchiha eyes. That bothered him even more.

"What are you doing here?" Sasuke asked the boy.

Itachi glanced past Sasuke at Naruto, and swallowed. "I was hoping to tell you something," he said. "I knew the Hokage was going to talk to you. I wanted to say something first."

"You're too late. He already talked to me," Sasuke replied. "And I already told him no."

Itachi's face didn't change. "Okay," he said. "I understand. You don't want to train me because you don't want to be reminded of your brother."

Sasuke frowned at him.

"I thought about it and I decided I should apologize," Itachi continued. "When I asked you to train me before, I was hoping you would because we are related, but that was presumptuous of me. I don't know anything about your clan. I'm not an Uchiha."

Sasuke didn't say anything. So far, that was accurate in his estimation.

"Right," Sasuke said slowly.

Itachi took a deep breath. "If you got to know me, you would realize that I'm not…the Itachi you knew. I just have his face. I don't even

think you to need to think of me as your brother's son. I'm my mother's son. So, to you, I'm just some kid, really, like any other kid."

Sasuke stared at the boy.

Itachi took a deep breath. "The only reason I'm asking you to train me is because we happen to share some of the same DNA, so we probably have similar abilities. If you do it, it doesn't make me an Uchiha. It wouldn't mean that you accept me as part of your family. It doesn't mean you like my family, especially my mother. I understand that. I just want to learn."

Sasuke could almost feel Naruto smiling behind him.

Just some kid? Hardly, but Sasuke took his point. If Sasuke trained 'just some kid' for a match, he would be absolved of his debt to Naruto. It didn't matter if Itachi won or lost the match. And it would have no bearing whatsoever on the Uchiha Clan. The kid bore his mother's family name and wasn't attempting to give it up and replace it with his.

He looked at Itachi's earnest face a second time. This time, he noted the differences. It wasn't exactly the same as his brother's face. The personality was assuredly different, and affected his expressions. Some of the same gentleness was there, and a similarity in observation and deep thinking, but Itachi was clearly more open and communicative than anyone in Sasuke's family had ever been, and practical too—almost to absurdity.

"I just want to do my best," Itachi said. "Anything you can teach me would help."

"His elemental ability," Naruto prompted. "That might be a good place to start."

Sasuke nodded. Fire ran strongly in the Uchiha bloodline. But would it be permissible to teach a non-Uchiha jutsus associated so strongly with the Uchiha Clan?

Then again, there wasn't an Uchiha Clan to take offense to it. Sasuke could do whatever he wanted.

Still, he hesitated. But as he thought, he happened to look up, staring beyond Itachi, and froze.

Sakura stood at the edge of the woods. She was looking right at him, most of her weight shifted over one hip, right hand clasping her left arm just below the elbow. Sasuke's heart thumped at the sight of her. Her expression was difficult to read, but it wasn't cheerful. He could tell that, even from a distance.

"I swear," Itachi said, distracting him. "Anything you teach me, I'll credit to your clan. And I won't claim the name. I promise." He stopped himself, as if realizing he might be starting to sound desperate.

Sasuke pulled his eyes away from Sakura, but she stayed in his mind, her image hovering in front of his eyes even as he looked down at Itachi. This kid was her student. She had wanted Sasuke to train him too.

It was just for a month.

"Are you good at anything?" Sasuke asked Itachi. "Do you have any talent at all?"

Itachi's eyes sparked with sudden hope. "Before I came here, I was mostly just good at math, but I'm learning," he replied hastily. "I'm getting better at Taijutsu. I don't know if I have a Sharingan, but I can break Genjutsu pretty easily now."

Genjutsu. His brother had been a master of Genjutsu at an age younger than Itachi was now, but so were lots of ninja. That skill wasn't specific to the Uchiha Clan. Neither was the fire element. If the child was at all gifted with his brother's talent, fire and Genjutsu would be a good place to start. Sasuke took a deep breath.

Just some kid.

"I won't help you with the Sharingan," he said. "If you have one, fine, but I won't bring it out in you."

"Okay," Itachi agreed. Sasuke could see that he had masked disappointment, but it didn't affect his earnestness at all. "That's fine. Anything you want."

"And I'm not agreeing to be your master," Sasuke said.

"Just until the match," Itachi said. "I get it. That's fine. That's great. I'll work hard. I'll do whatever you say. I swear it."

"Come back here tomorrow morning then," Sasuke said, his eyes drifting beyond Itachi's head to look again at Sakura. "I have other things to take care of today."

The kid nodded. He turned abruptly, almost tripping over his sister in an attempt to retreat, perhaps before Sasuke could change his mind. Sasuke wasn't sure kid's thinking was wrong.

But his eyes remained locked on Sakura. Her lips had turned upward in a smile, but it was somehow sad, and her eyes were moist.

Sasuke turned to Naruto. "Is that good enough?" he asked.

Naruto nodded. He strolled past Sasuke to the outside porch. He glanced at Sakura, then smiled at Sasuke. "Yep."

His friend followed the path Itachi had taken away from the house.

Sasuke was left alone.

Sakura approached slowly, not quite meeting his eyes. It wasn't until both Naruto and Itachi and his sister were out of sight that she drew close enough for them to exchange words without shouting. She walked up onto the porch and stood a few paces away from where

he waited on the threshold of the door, far enough away that he couldn't quite reach out to touch her.

"Hi," she said.

His breath stopped in his throat.

"I wanted to apologize," she said. "It was unkind of me to leave with all that anger between us. I just—"

"It's okay," he said quickly. He didn't care now. He just wanted to hold her, but he didn't move. Something about her body posture kept him at bay. She still hadn't quite looked at him.

"Are you going to train Itachi for the fight?" she asked.

"Yeah."

She nodded. "I'm sure you didn't do it for me, but… thank you anyway."

"I owe it to Naruto."

But he had thought of her feelings.

She didn't say anything for a minute. "It will mean a lot to him," she said finally. "Itachi, I mean. It's not his fault, you know—what happened to your family."

"I understand that," Sasuke agreed. He wished she would come closer.

"It's not my fault either," she said.

His heart constricted. "I know."

She lowered her head. "I understand that it's hard. It can't be easy. You've been through a lot to accept that everyone is… gone. Now there are these kids. And it doesn't help that Lucia is such a cold

person. I know you think that she hurt your brother and I know that you don't trust her. I don't trust her either. She's just too secretive. But don't take it out on… Itachi."

Or her.

He closed his eyes. "Come here," he said. If he could just touch her, he could absolve this.

She swayed, not moving, like a reed on the bank.

He crossed the space between them and wrapped an arm around her slender waist. He pulled her close, hugging her body against his, inhaling the scent of her hair as she buried her head in his shoulder. She felt so good in his arms, so soft and supple and warm. He could barely think of anything but-

"I don't want to fight," he whispered into her ear.

She shook in his grip, quavering like a leaf on the limb in autumn. And he thought… Were those tears wetting his neck? He clasped her tighter.

"Sasuke," she said, her voice quivering. She *was* crying. Why was she crying? "I have to tell you something."

His hands threaded through her hair. He tilted her head back and kissed her. Her breathing quickened. He could tell because she breathed right into his mouth. He could feel her heart beat thumping in her chest too, hammering in response to his kiss.

He pulled her inside, lifting her with one arm, and shut the door. His hands caressed her face, soft under his touch. His eyes were filled with her eyes. He pushed her back against the door, trapping her against the wall. His hands ran up the sides of her body from her hips to her ribs. He pulled at her buttons.

"Wait," she begged, but there was a fever in her voice. She responded to every touch, moving closer to him, tugging at his arms. His body felt like a furnace. "Please wait."

"No."

"Sasuke, I have to *tell* you something."

He paused, his body on fire, his arms wrapped around her. She panted, staring up into his eyes.

"What?" he asked. It came out impatient, half a growl. He simply couldn't think. He smoothed her hair back. "What do you want to say?"

Her lips parted, strawberry red. Her breasts heaved as she breathed. He could feel her body trembling under his hands, aching for him. She didn't say anything for several long moments.

"I love you," she blurted. It tumbled off her lips like a prayer.

He lifted her up. She weighed nothing. Her legs wrapped around him of their own accord. Pushing her against the door with his body, he looked into her face.

"I love you too."

Naruto returned to the Hokage's office to find Shikamaru sitting with Lucia.

She had remained at his request. She sat in the chair opposite his desk, legs crossed, her expression cool and serene, despite that the events of the morning had worsened her situation. Not surprising. He knew from trying that riling her emotionally was like trying to rile a rock.

Shikamaru got up from his seat and shut the door so that the three of them were alone. Naruto remained standing.

"I've been talking to Lucia about the Grass," Shikamaru informed him. "She's been telling me a bit about Gehard and the people with him."

Naruto nodded. He would debrief Shikamaru on that later, as they had agreed.

"Sasuke is going to train your son for the fight," he informed Lucia. "There's a chance he could be severely injured."

"I understand," she replied.

There was no outward change in her expression. Her face was exquisite, but like a mould carved from ivory, framed by soft, dark curls that tumbled around her shoulders. Her dark eyes were all calculation, but Naruto still *sensed* worry from her—a mother's worry. She was good at hiding it, but Itachi's survival was very important to her.

"I'm concerned about how the village is going to react to this fight," he told her. "The Grass has made it clear that they do not support your children being accounted among the Leaf. They have made it clear that they consider you dangerous."

"But you're not going to turn me over?" she said, repeating what he had told her before.

"No," Naruto replied. "As I've said, there is no proof against you, and until I know more, my gut tells me to have faith in your intentions. But I want you to know that I may be alone in my thinking before too long."

She didn't even blink. "I'm sorry to put you at odds with your people. It is not easy to act alone."

"It's not the first time," Naruto told her. He took a deep breath. This part came from his discussions with Shikamaru.

"This match is going to draw some attention, especially since Sasuke has agreed to train your son. I might invite delegates from the Grass to witness the event—your son against our best student. If he puts up a good fight, and acts in a manner befitting of a Shinobi, it might put to rest some of these rumors, not just here, but everywhere. And if he *wins* -" Naruto let it hang.

"That's a lot of stress to put on a young boy," Lucia said. "He is only twelve."

"I know," Naruto said, "but he's a bright kid and a hard worker. I think a public demonstration of his grit will be better for him in the long run."

Lucia nodded. "I can see the wisdom in that."

"One other thing," Naruto told her.

She waited.

"I promised I would be straight with you. I told you up front that I would investigate you. So I'm going to tell you what I told Sasuke. I've sent someone to your home town to ask questions."

Did she react? It was difficult to tell with her. Outwardly, there was no sign of it.

"Is that all?" she asked.

Sakura opened her eyes to starlight streaming in through the windows of the bedroom.

She groaned as she shifted under the sheets. Her body was still recovering. And it felt…so good.

Sasuke lay sleeping on his back beside her, his expression peaceful in slumber. His chest rose and fell evenly. One arm lay over his stomach.

She stared at him for a minute. The situation was hopeless. She knew it was. She was hooked—irrevocably intoxicated with love for this beautiful, troubled man. She lifted the hand on his stomach and slithered under his arm. She kissed his sternum and then rested her cheek against his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

She hadn't told him. She didn't know how to tell him.

Sasuke stirred in his sleep. His arm tightened around her. Half asleep, he still pulled her close. He seemed so relievedto have her back. They had both been so apologetic, whispering sorries in the dark, and following it up with soft, then rough, possessive kisses...and other things.

She couldn't leave him. She knew that.

But she had to tell him. She knew that too.

But when?

Maybe she should wait to see if it even stuck. Sometimes pregnancies dissolved. It was still very early. The readings could even be wrong. And if not… Well, if not, there were options. She didn't like them, but she didn't have to decide anything immediately. She didn't have to think about it at all. Sasuke had a lot on his mind too. They had just made up, and now he had to train Itachi. She didn't want to add to that. It could wait.

On some level, she knew she was being a coward, but looking at Sasuke's sleeping face, she wasn't sure it wasn't the best thing to do. It had been ages since she had seen him so devoid of worry. He needed a break. She could handle this on her own for awhile. When she did tell him, she would at least have a better idea how she felt. And what she needed.

Maybe by then, he would even feel differently.

Breathing deeply, Sakura buried her face in Sasuke's skin and tried to keep the tears leaking from her eyes both soft and silent.

Itachi woke with the dawn, eyes snapping wide open and heart pattering from his first conscious breath. After Sasuke dismissed him, he had spent the rest of yesterday training with Amaya and Haro, every nerve jittery from thinking about what today would bring. He ought to be exhausted, but he threw the covers off the bed and immediately got ready.

Fully dressed and armed for a fight, he closed the door to his room softly, careful not to be too loud at risk of waking his mother. He could tell from her mood the night before that this would be one of those days that she would sleep late. She often did that when she was upset. She hadn't said that she was, but he was used to interpreting her silences.

He was surprised to find Rina waiting for him at the front door. She was fully dressed too.

"What are you doing up?" he asked her. "You can't come with me."

"I'll just watch," she protested. Her brow crinkled between her eyebrows. He noticed she had a bag slung over her shoulder, with her composition piece peeking over the top. She must think this was no different than all the times they had spent together before coming to Konoha, after school had ended and they had adventured around to avoid going home. He had spent little time with her lately, and he had come close to being killed, so he could understand her wanting to come along. Besides which, watching him train with Sasuke was probably more interesting than anything else she might do today.

"If Sasuke tells you to leave, will you go?"

She nodded.

"All right then," he said, "but stay out of the way, okay? I need to focus."

She didn't say anything more, so he just opened the door to let her out the front door and followed after. They walked side by side to Sasuke's house, the pale rising sun not yet warm at their backs. In truth, it was a bit of a comfort to him to have Rina tag along. She was unobtrusive and honest. She would watch closely and give him objective, but encouraging advice. He might need that. It wouldn't surprise him if Sasuke was a little brutal.

When they reached the house in the clearing, Itachi could see Sasuke standing on the porch, staring north with blank eyes, as if watching ghosts.

Itachi stopped just below the steps, Rina at his side. He licked his lips. "Sasuke?" he called.

A gentle breeze drifted through the clearing as Sasuke turned. It seemed to sweep the glaze from his eyes as well as stirring his hair and clothes. He looked right at Itachi, who attempted to look back without showing fear. Sasuke was an impressive figure, tall and muscled, with dark, penetrating eyes that seemed to soak up everything around him. This guy was going to 'train' him? He could throw Itachi over the roof of his house without half trying. Itachi tried not feel nervous.

The door to the house opened and Sakura emerged, shutting it behind her.

"Hello, Itachi," she said. Her eyes drifted to Sasuke, who hadn't greeted him.

"Are you coming?" Itachi asked her.

"Yes," she said, "for part of the day anyway."

Itachi tried not to think too hard about what that meant. Sakura lived with Sasuke, so maybe accompanying them was just something she would do as his girlfriend. But she was also Itachi's teacher, and she had been short with Sasuke about his treatment of him earlier. Maybe she felt it was necessary to supervise. Maybe Sasuke needed her support. Or maybe she thought Itachi would need healing by the end of the day.

"Rina's here because she wants to watch," he informed them both. "She promised not to interfere. I told her it was up to Sasuke."

Sasuke just shrugged.

Sakura sighed. She smiled at Rina. "I guess it's okay. But do stay out of the way, Rina."

As a group of four, they walked in silence to one of the training grounds outside the village. Itachi trailed behind Sasuke and Sakura, watching them both closely for subtle clues about how they were feeling. Sakura hovered close to Sasuke, within an inch of touching him. They seemed to be getting along, as occasionally he would brush a hand against her wrist or elbow, as if to remind himself that she was right there.

To Itachi, Sasuke emitted an aloof, icy air. It reminded him of his mother when she was in a particularly business-like frame of mind. When she instructed him in matters she considered important, she brooked no nonsense, allowed for no excuses, was ferociously focused, and would pull no punches when he made mistakes. If training in jutsu with Sasuke was anything like studying with his mother, he was in for a rough day.

They arrived in a grassy area secluded by forest rift with a mix of trails and undergrowth. There were a few posts driven into the ground several yards distant. Itachi had been here before for target practice with kunai knives, but Sasuke ignored the posts. Instead, he led Itachi to the middle of the glen and drew from a pouch around his

waist an envelope filled with pieces of rectangular paper no larger than his palm.

Sakura led Rina aside with a gesture. They sat together on a log just outside the green. Rina's eyes remained on Itachi, her shoulder bag now in her lap.

Face to face with Sasuke, Itachi forgot about the girls. He watched as Sasuke selected one of the pieces of paper, pulling it free from the others with his thumb and forefinger and holding it up in front of Itachi.

"Feed your chakra into one of these," he said. "It doesn't take much."

"What is it?"

"Paper from chakra trees. It will tell us your elemental type."

Itachi took the piece of paper. It was thin, almost see-through. Focusing, he fed a trickle of his chakra into the paper. It burst into flame instantly, disintegrating into ash almost before he had time to gasp.

Sasuke didn't look surprised. "Fire," he said. "I'm the same, though by your age I also knew lightning."

Itachi didn't comment. Fire.

"I'm going to teach you a Katon," Sasuke said, "the Great Fireball technique that I learned before I was eight. If you're any good at all, you should be able to get it in a day. If you can't do that, there's no point in training you any further."

"Sasuke," Sakura said, a little harshly.

Sasuke closed his eyes. "I mean you may not be ready for advanced jutsu," he said.

Despite Sasuke's amendment, Itachi had the impression that he had better get the jutsu today.

"Stand aside," Sasuke instructed.

Itachi stepped out of the way, moving to stand beside Sasuke, though keeping space between them so as not to crowd him. Sasuke didn't look at him when he spoke.

"This is a short range offensive jutsu," he said. "The hand seals are Snake, Ram, Monkey, Boar, Horse, Tiger. Executing it correctly requires a timed release of your chakra through the mouth using Fire Style. Watch how I do it."

Itachi tried not to think of the pressure. He had never done anything as complicated as what Sasuke had described before, so he did as instructed: he watched.

Sasuke's hands flickered—almost faster than Itachi could keep track of the signs. " *Katon! Gōkakyu no Jutsu!"* Sasuke brought his fingers to his lips, his thumb and forefinger forming a circle, and blew.

Fire erupted into the dry air, enveloping half the glen in a billowing ball of heat and flame.

It vanished as quickly as it came. Sasuke remained, untouched by the heat himself. He looked at Itachi as if to say 'your turn.'

Swallowing, Itachi copied Sasuke's stance. He formed the signs, tried to do it quickly, but not so fast that he would mess up. He was conscious of Sasuke's eyes beating down on him, and tried to calm himself. Snake, Ram, Monkey, Boar, Horse, Tiger. It was a tricky combination, and he seemed to get bogged down at the end, but he formed them deliberately one at a time, gathering his chakra, and brought his fingers to his lips the way Sasuke had done.

" *Katon! Gōkakyu no Jutsu!"*

Nothing happened. There wasn't even a blast of hot air, or a surge to tell him he had at least done the forms correctly.

Sasuke didn't say anything.

Itachi repeated the signs . " *Katon! Gōkakyu no Jutsu!"*

Nothing.

He was afraid to look at Sasuke.

He tried again. Nothing.

He tried not to feel the disappointment he felt emanating from the people around him. No one spoke. Sakura had her hands clenched into fists over her knees. Rina didn't even seem to be paying attention, perhaps to spare him embarrassment. She had her notebook open and appeared to be drawing notes, the fingers on her left hand tapping a rhythm against her knee.

Finally, on the fifth try, Itachi produced a tiny flame. It burned the air just in front of his nose, in a space no larger than the size of his hand, hardly enough to singe the whiskers off of a cat. He thought of Yukio's face, laughing at him, if he did that in the arena. His stomach trembled.

Sasuke just stood there, looking down on him. His expression was hard to read, but Itachi felt the weight of it. It hit him like a brick in the gut. Sasuke turned away. "Come find me if you get it," Sasuke said, "or if you give up."

He walked away, straight across the grass and into the trees.

Sakura rose. She shot a look at Itachi. "Keep practicing!" she said, and darted after Sasuke.

Itachi didn't know what to think. He tried to analyze what he had done wrong. He wasn't doing the hand signs fast enough, or evenly enough, so that when it came time to produce the flame, he had

already expended too much of his chakra. If he had a lot of excess chakra in store, maybe he could do it, but he wasn't gifted that way. He had to get it perfect.

He tried the combination again, but the result was no better. Another time, he was once again unable to make a flame at all. He tried again, but discouraged by intermittent failure and uninspiring success, the flame was even more pitiable.

The sun climbed higher in the sky. He practiced until his stomach started to growl, but eventually had to sit down, frustrated and exhausted, his chest heaving as if he had run a mile. He had only produced a handful of tiny flames.

Rina set down her notebook. She climbed off the log and crossed the clearing toward him. Itachi ignored her, fisting the grass, ripping it out in tufts, and trying not to think. He was afraid he would snap at her if he spoke.

She crouched down beside him, arms around her knees.

Eventually, feeling sullen and discouraged, he looked at her. "What?" he asked.

"Your timing is off," she said.

"Thanks, Rina." He hadn't meant it sound sarcastic, but he was frustrated and it came out that way.

She pursed her lips together. "Give me your hand."

He gave it to her, not sure what she intended.

She tapped two of her fingers against his palm. He frowned. He thought he recognized the rhythm. It was the same one she had been playing against her knee while writing in her notebook. Six taps, followed by a soft slap of all her fingers. She repeated it.

"I don't—" he began.

She did it again, but spoke while she did it. "Snake, Ram, Monkey, Boar, Horse, Tiger." Pause. "Katon."

He stared at her.

"That's how Sasuke did it," she said. "You're waiting too long between the Tiger and the release." She tapped it out one more time. "Try again."

She let go of his hand.

Itachi had never had Rina's creative streak for music—composition just wasn't a passion for him—but rhythm he had been good at. Amaya had said something about how counting might benefit him in accessing his Sharingan, but it never would have occurred to him to use it to understand *any* jutsu. Any jutsu that required timing anyway. He had heard that music was a universal communicator, but this was something else.

"You're amazing," he said to his sister. "That's ingenious." He meant it.

She smiled.

He got to his feet, repeating the rhythm in his head, counting it out. He waited until Rina had safely crossed the grass and returned to the log.

Taking a deep breath, Itachi tried again. When thinking of it as a triplet, the last three hand signs came together faster and more smoothly, if not as fast as Sasuke had done it. He wasn't that dexterous, but even at his speed, he felt the jutsu click.

" *Katon! Gōkakyu no Jutsu!"*

Fire lit up the meadow. He felt the heat on his face, the dryness of the air as flames from his mouth swallowed the oxygen. The fire faded as soon as he ran out of breath to fuel it, winking out as if it

had never been, but the evidence remained in grass singed black to ash and leaves shriveled in the boughs of the tree.

He staggered from the expulsion of chakra, panting, wanting to sink down to one knee from the sudden swimming feeling in his head, but he locked his knees and turned to Rina.

"How big was it?" he demanded. His lips cracked when he spoke and the words came out a croak. There seemed to be no moisture left in his throat.

"About half," Rina replied. She was always honest.

It needed to be bigger then.

Frowning, he tried again. And then again, expelling more chakra with each rendition that worked, his confidence growing. He was going to get this.

Sakura sat on the grass in a meadow near to where they had left Itachi, watching Sasuke whack the heads off dandelion puffs. They had talked, but now he was silent. He had been pensive for about an hour. She didn't disturb him. She could tell he was adjusting and needed time to do it. This morning had been hard for Sasuke—harder in some ways than it had been for Itachi, though she felt for the kid's frustration and embarrassment.

It was just that teaching Itachi that jutsu seemed to have brought back memories to Sasuke, memories he hadn't wanted to recall. He had told her, haltingly, when she pressed, that his father had taught him that jutsu. Watching Itachi try it, and then fail at it, had apparently produced more feeling than he had expected. He had had to leave.

Sakura felt helpless. She just sat while he brooded, hands in her lap, nearby if he needed her.

He hadn't spoken since, and it was almost noon. She was about to suggest that maybe they take a break—let Itachi train the rest of the day without them—when Itachi appeared in the meadow, ducking under some low hanging boughs, his sister trailing behind him.

Sasuke turned. He looked startled.

"Are you giving up?" he asked.

"No," Itachi replied. His face was hard set, more determined than before. Sakura got to her feet. Itachi looked right at Sasuke, not moving. "I got it," he said.

Sasuke looked positively startled.

Itachi formed the hand signs, all six fluidly, exactly as Sasuke had done them, if not quite as quickly.

" *Katon! Gōkakyu no Jutsu!"*

Sakura scrambled backwards.

Sasuke was right in the line of fire—literally—but he didn't budge. His eyes widened only fractionally as flame burst into being, billowing out in a ballooning curtain. His hands moved faster than Itachi's lips.

" *Katon! Gōkakyu no Jutsu!"*

Fire clashed with fire. Two great balls of flame met in the center of the meadow. The heat of it slammed Sakura in the face, causing her eyes to water. She stood her ground, amazed, even after both fireballs disintegrated.

When the smoke cleared, Itachi beamed at Sasuke, panting from exertion. The corners of his mouth were burned. "How was that?"

Sasuke darted forward, crouched low to the ground, and still almost too fast to follow.

Behind Itachi, Rina squeaked, both hands flying to her mouth.

Sasuke's fist jabbed upward, slugging Itachi in the gut, just below the ribs. His nephew collapsed over Sasuke's arm, knees buckling from the assault. He pitched forward.

"Don't ever let your guard down," Sasuke said. He straightened, stepping back from Itachi, who fell to the earth as soon as he was released, and lay still.

Sakura barely breathed.

For a moment, there was silence.

And then, slowly, Itachi straightened.

He rose haltingly, unwinding like a badly coiled spring, but he rose, his face gray with pain, one hand clutching his stomach, clearly winded and in pain. He hobbled as he took a step forward to balance himself. His voice came out a wheeze, but the words were clear.

"Now what?" he said.

"Now the real training begins," Sasuke said.

TBC

Reviewer Thanks

I am still working hard on this story and would like to thank everyone who has kept with me, especially those who review, as it adds so much reward to writing the story and encouraging me to continue it. I love hearing your thoughts, especially details about what you think of the characters, the plot situations, and the individual scenes. Every piece of feedback I get is highly appreciated!

I am glad that everyone enjoys the long chapters as well. I feel like I can develop more in a long chapter, though they do take longer to

write. Thank you for being patient! I know it has been awhile since the last update.

Thank you to everyone who commented last chapter! This includes some new names (I'm please to say) as well as old. Big thanks to: **anonesque, achor, Twinnet, Lucathia Rykatu** (glad you like my essays on LJ too!), **Adel-chan, hotchocoalatte, bluetopaz83** (yay! So happy to see you are reading!), **Kat Morning, a Thousand Cranes, Dark Inu Fan, suddon, hymnia** (thanks for reviewing twice!), **zhusanna, Araine, anna707, perfidiouspink** (love that name), **Dreamwriter23, Crimson Marionette, Rin-elwin, Imperial Inquisitor, Niana Kuonji, First Weaver, thndrnlghtnng , sparklecakes, Shadowheart251, Aishuu, Dionysos, The Violent Tomboy, the Awesomest One, satoshii, HeroineInducedPanic, Lifestyle.**

Favorite Comments that made me giggle (in no particular order): Lifestyle, HeroineInducedPanic, Satoshii, anna707, First Weaver, suddon, anonesque, Adel-Chan, Lucathia Rykatu, bluetopaz83, Kat Morning, a thousand cranes, hymnia, Zhusanna.

Thanks again!

Questions I have for readers this time if they feel inclined to answer:

Lucia : The feedback I'm getting tells me that people are getting what I meant to convey. But any thoughts you can add about this character and her place in the plot as the story progress will help me with development!

The Sasuke/Sakura situation : Some people are not SasuSaku fans (increasingly, I think, as these characters have changed somewhat in the manga of late—yikes), but how is the development working for this story?

Itachi and Rina: Original characters are tough, especially in fanfic, and an even harder sell as Next Gen (trust me; I know all the rules I

have broken!) so I always appreciate hearing what people think of these characters as the story goes on.

Naruto : Naruto has made a decision in this story regarding Lucia that is unpopular with some of his closest allies and the village at large. Curious about your thoughts.

Chapter 13

Hello everyone! Thank you for patiently waiting for the next addition of this story. I'm sorry it has been so long in coming. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that I had to write further into the story than I could post into this chapter… just to make sure the plotting made sense. In that respect, this chapter might be seen as **Part 1 of a two part special** . I have written most of Part 2, so hopefully the next chapter will not be such a long wait.

I would like to thank anyone who has reviewed this story, favorited this story, or recommended this story (I have to confess, I'm not very familiar with community groups and I don't know where the other fanfiction sites are for Naruto, so recs are appreciated!).

Finally, I must apologize to all the people who complimented my take on SasuSaku and are awaiting more SasuSaku goodness. There isn't much of it in this chapter…. (I'm so sorry!) but more is coming (I promise).

White Rain

Chapter 13

By Zapenstap

Lucia woke to the sound of hail pattering against the glass pane outside her bedroom window. For a moment, she didn't know where she was. She opened her eyes, but in the darkness, she saw nothing but shadows outlining deeper shadows. The residue of an unsettling dream clung to the inside of her skull, but all she could remember of it was an emotional impression-a sense of something gone wrong or about to go wrong.

When had night fallen?

She lay fully dressed, reclining against a stack of pillows on top of the covers. She hadn't meant to fall asleep. She had been waiting up, through the dinner hour, and then past that, listening for the door. What time was it? It had to be past midnight.

The house was too quiet. She could sense the emptiness of it—terrifying emptiness.

Itachi never came home.

She swung her bare feet off the bed and rose, feeling her way through the dark to the door. The hallway beyond was not any brighter, but she moved through the gloom without slowing, and opened the door to Itachi's room. Moonlight from the window illuminated it just enough to tell her it was empty.

Lucia paused, breathing deeply. This wasn't the first time this had happened since this training had begun. He was somewhere in the village. He was with Sasuke Uchiha. Even in this weather, he would be fine.

A shower of sleet rapped against the outer walls. Shutting the door, Lucia crossed the hall and propped open the door to Rina's room. Her daughter was not in bed either.

Panic was instant, but before she could react outwardly, the front door to the house creaked softly open.

Lucia turned and hurried through the remainder of the hallway and down the stairs in her bare feet. She was greeted by the sight of her son—twelve now—shutting the front door and shaking out his cloak. Lucia froze on the bottom step.

"What were you thinking? Rina cannot be out this late, Itachi."

Itachi's head jerked up. It took Lucia a second to realize that Rina had not come through the door with him.

"Rina isn't here?" he asked. "Well she isn't with me! I sent her home at dinner."

For a moment, they stared at each other in silence. But then, behind Itachi, the front door creaked open a second time, much more softly. Rina pushed her way inside, moping through the door like a drowned mouse, head down, her hair soaked with rain water and her slender shoulders covered with tiny balls of ice. She shivered visibly, and avoided looking at either Itachi or Lucia.

"Where have you been?" Lucia demanded.

Rina merely shut the door behind her.

"Answer me, Rina!"

Her daughter's head jerked up. "I was only out a few minutes! You were asleep when I came home. I heard the hail. I was worried about Itachi."

"So you ran out in the middle of the night?" Lucia snapped.

Rina didn't reply. She hiccoughed instead, her little features screwed into a knot to hold back tears.

"You inform me where you are going. Always! Do you understand me?"

Rina nodded mutely.

"Good. Go to your room."

Rina slipped past Lucia and slunk up the stairs.

Lucia rounded on Itachi. "Do you know what time it is?"

He held up his hands defensively. "It's not my fault. Sasuke just doesn't care how late it gets." He scrubbed a hand through his hair.

Water splashed on the floor around his feet in great big drops. "Or what the conditions are." He grimaced, shaking out his hand.

Lucia was silent for a few moments. "It's the third time this week. Do I have to talk to him?"

"No!"

Lucia pursed her lips.

Itachi flushed. "I mean, please don't. You'll just make it worse. I can handle it. It's fine."

Lucia accepted this with silence, but she wasn't so sure. Her son had never been a complainer, even when he ought to complain. Outwardly, he seemed to be holding up, but she knew him. This training was a strain. He had a lot of energy for a boy, and a lot of resilience, but she could tell how exhausted he was, and how discouraged-more so every day. He was working hard, but hard work could only make up for so much. She didn't know what advice to give him. As for begging her not to talk to Sasuke, she wasn't sure how much of that was fear of Sasuke's reaction and how much of it was adolescent pride rejecting a mother's inference.

She eyed him sideways. "Are you hungry?"

He nodded mutely.

She made him a late dinner, trying to ignore how gingerly he sat down, as if every muscle and bone in his body hurt. She noticed too that he favored his left hand, and wondered how he had injured himself. It was an effort not to ask him, but he hadn't told her anything about his training before now, no matter how she pressed, and she understood why: this was between him and Sasuke. Pestering him about it would just add to his stress.

He set to eating with a healthy appetite, however.

"Itachi," she said, watching him shovel food into his mouth. "This boy you are going to fight-"

"Yukio."

"Is he as good as I've been hearing?"

Few people in the village spoke to Lucia directly, but she heard things. Comments were slipped in as she passed by, mostly about how this boy—Yukio—was going to murder her son before all of Konoha.

Lucia was used to threat, both veiled and overtly hostile, but threats against the life of her children were harder to rebuff.

She had seen Yukio too. He was a good looking kid with dark hair and a healthy, vigorous look about him. He radiated confidence—and cockiness. He had looked at her directly from across the street, recognized her easily, it seemed. She returned his gaze coolly. He had grinned. He hadn't spoken to her. He hadn't needed to.

"Yeah," Itachi answered. "And he's training too."

Lucia didn't reply. When Itachi finished, she heaped a second helping onto her son's plate.

Amaya had pulled closed all the shutters, so the light in her room was dim even at midday. She stood before the little oval mirror hanging on the wall above her desk, gazing at her murky reflection while pulling a brush through the tangles in her hair.

The tangles were difficult to separate, and she grimaced as she worked at them. She had had a rough morning with Haro and Itachi. They had started tactical training at dawn, rehearsing maneuvers incorporating both taijutsu and ninjutsu in the woods. Their coordination was improving, but all of them had taken a few tumbles.

They had called it quits around noon because Itachi had to meet with Sasuke and Haro's brothers were going to train him in medical ninjutsu. Deprived of teammates, Amaya had returned home to make herself lunch and decided to take the time to clean up before beginning her solo training exercise. This afternoon, she planned to perfect her new jutsu—one she hoped would be enough to trip up Yukio.

She smiled at herself in the mirror.

Then she heard the front door open.

Her heart gave a little jump. The brush in her hand froze. Silky, electrified wisps curled away from the bristles, clinging to her nose and lips.

"Father?" she called. "Is that you?"

Only creaking floorboards greeted her call, but she knew it was him. He always moved in the same patterns, and at the same slow, measured pace.

She put the brush down. Hurriedly, she pulled on her wrist guards, fastened her belt pouch around her waist, and tied her Konoha forehead protector around her head.

She flung open the door, panting, before he could reach her room.

He stood in the hallway, cloaked like a shadow, gazing at her from behind a heavy black cowl that hid his head, his neck, his chest, his face—everything except his eyes.

"You're back," she breathed. "When did you get back?"

"Just now. But I need to see the Hokage."

"Was there a problem?" she asked anxiously. "Did something happen on your mission?"

"No," he said. "Nothing like that."

She breathed a little easier. Of course there wasn't a problem. There was never a problem. Her father's missions always went flawlessly.

"Do you have enough to eat?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said. She had done the shopping yesterday. But he only asked that question for one reason. She didn't have to ask what it was.

"I will be leaving on a follow-up mission tonight," he told her. "I'll be gone for a few days. Maybe a few weeks."

She didn't respond. If it was a few weeks, he would miss the match.

"It's nothing dangerous," Sachio said.

With a start, she realized he was trying to reassure her. She must have let something show in her face. Carefully arranging her features to cool serenity, she looked up. "I'm sure if you are leading, it will go well. I will take care of everything while you're gone."

She couldn't see his face, but she imagined that he smiled at her beneath his cowl. "I'm blessed," he said. "You're such a mature girl. Keep it up and you will be a Jounin in no time."

She dropped her eyes.

"What about your training?" he asked. "Is it going well?"

"Yes."

He reached out, his hand touching to top of her head, a gesture he had performed since she was a child. "You're getting so tall," he muttered. "When I get back, I will teach you a new jutsu. I have been thinking about it."

Amaya's heart fluttered. She looked up. "I… I've learned some myself, on my own. And I have a match. My first public match. I don't know if you heard—"

"I did," he said. "That is what I want to speak to the Hokage about. I have no doubt that you will excel. But Amaya, I want to caution you. Don't get too close to this teammate of yours."

Her heart constricted. "Itachi?" She knew it had to be Itachi, and not Haro. "Why? I…I thought I should be nice to him. Isn't that what I should do? You taught me to—"

"You can't choose your team," he said. "As a Shinobi, you will work with many other ninja, not all of them as disciplined or capable as you would like, so cooperation is an important skill to learn. I don't know much about the boy, but it sounds like he needs your help, so you should help him. That is befitting of a Shinobi. Just don't get too close. His… relations are worrying. There are political issues. I don't want you to get caught up in it."

Amaya didn't say anything. What would her father do if she got… caught up in it? What was she supposed to do now? What did he *want* her to do?

Something inside her was trembling. She had been working so hard to prepare for this match. She and Haro and Itachi had practically broken themselves over it. She had been thinking that— But she was wrong. It didn't matter.

Her father turned away.

"Do…do you want me to make dinner?" she blurted.

He didn't look back at her. "You don't have to worry about that. Just take care of yourself."

Amaya stood in the hallway, unmoving, watching as he walked away from her.

The front door opened and shut.

Amaya turned back to her room. Everything looked just as she had left it. She looked at her reflection in the gray glass. A young woman looked back at her. She exhaled slowly, and smiled at her reflection. It smiled back. She willed the effect to work the other way around, but it didn't.

Silently, she resumed brushing her hair.

After that, she polished her kunai knives and shuriken, one after the other, until each gleamed. She laid them out on the dresser and stared at them.

She stared and stared, until slowly, the sight began to blur.

There were no thoughts in her head. She couldn't think. She didn't know why. She just started ripping off her ninja gear—the armguards, the belt, the boots, even the forehead protector—and began throwing them, one after another, onto the floor.

Naruto chewed on the end of the pen, frowning at the letter laid out on the desk.

The letter had arrived this morning. He had read it six times. It was short and simple. The handwriting was legible. He didn't understand it at all.

It was an effort not to groan and flail his arms. He didn't need any more problems. What with Sasuke training Itachi, the Grass after Lucia, and everything else, this was the last thing he needed.

"They've never refused before," he complained.

He hated writing to the Feudal Lords for favors. It was painful to admit he needed help and difficult to convey that he wasn't looking

for hand-outs. But he really did need the help. And after psyching himself up to ask, he had been…denied.

"I know there's debt," he muttered, "but are times really so hard for them too?"

"Maybe," Shikamaru said from the chair across from him. His advisor was reading the letter upside down. "Could be that money is as tight for them as it is for us. Peace has changed things a lot. Everyone over spent in the war, and without war spoils, they actually have to *produce* ."

"Right," Naruto said. "Buuuuuuut…?" He trailed off expectantly,. With Shikamaru, there was always a 'but.'

"But it might not have to do with that at all. You are a rather unpredictable Hokage. Maybe they just want to see what you *do* if they refuse."

"Blegh."

It was the only response that seemed fitting. So this might be a test. Naruto hated tests, especially psychology tests. If they wanted to know what he would do, they should just ask him.

But he was learning that some people just didn't think that way. Fortunately, he had Shikamaru, who was skilled at seeing all the angles and laying it out simply. Naruto didn't always act on Shikamaru's advice, but his analysis of situations helped.

"There's another possibility," Shikamaru said, and he looked hesitant as he spoke. This gave Naruto a bad feeling.

"What?" Naruto asked. "Tell me."

Shikamaru was silent for a moment, seeming to chew the words as he thought about how to phrase whatever he was about to say. Naruto was used to it, but it was hard to suppress impatience.

"Well," Shikamaru said. "This may be their way—denying you funds, I mean—of telling you that the village is losing its value."

"Losing it's-?" Hearing that was like swallowing a lead balloon. He stared at Shikamaru in horror. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Shikamaru said, arms crossed from where he reclined in his chair, his gaze drifting away from Naruto's face. "We've done such a good job keeping the peace that we've worked ourselves out of usefulness. The demand for Shinobi services has fallen."

"I know," Naruto said. "That's why we need funding—"

"Yes, but it's not *profitable* for them to fund us," Shikamaru told him. "You want funding to train Shinobi to perform jobs that don't exist."

"But—"

"They'll expect you to push for funds," Shikamaru said. "It's your job to grow and manage the village. But they don't have to agree. If they don't give you the funds, we will have to cut back on the number of Shinobi. And that might suit them just fine."

Naruto recoiled. "That's..." He couldn't think of the right word. Manipulative. Mean. Miserly. "After all we've done for the Land of Fire? After all the sacrifice and-!" He was fuming. "If that's what they're thinking, at the very least, they ought to come out and tell me!"

Shikamaru shrugged, a little smile twitching on one side of his mouth. "Maybe you scare them a little."

Naruto realized he had snapped the pen he was holding in half. His thoughts swirled angrily inside his head, too fast to grasp. He set the shards of the pen down, propped his elbows on the desk, and pressed his forehead into his fingers. He examined his feelings closely.

If he understood correctly, they were being denied work for doing too good of a job. But what were they supposed to have done? Let a little war continue? What did the Feudal Lords want him to do now? Okay, they could cut back even further on how many Genin became Chuunin and how many Chuunin became Jounin and how many Jounin received jobs, but Naruto was already struggling with assignments. So many wonderful Shinobi were sitting idly by. And the village was *growing* . There were so many promising youths this year…

"I don't… *get* it," he huffed. "Why are they doing this? Are they ungrateful?" He sensed his own stubbornness interfering with his comprehension. He did get it. He just didn't *want* to get it. "Okay. Let's *say* I don't get it. Explain it to me. What does it mean …in the long run?"

Shikamaru took a deep breath. He took his time explaining.

It wasn't a matter of anyone starving. If there weren't funds to support Shinobi and their families, Shinobi would just have to take other jobs. There were other jobs to be had in the village as well as outside of it. Not everyone in the village trained to be a Shinobi, and some Shinobi had always supplemented their income by doing other things when there weren't missions to be had, like Ino and the Yamanaka flower shop.

But over time, if the Feudal Lords didn't support them, their way of life would disappear. Supplemental work would become full time work. Eventually, the Shinobi training program wouldn't be able to support itself. In a worst case scenario, the entire ninja village structure would collapse. The Village Hidden in the Leaves would become just another village like any other in the Land of Fire.

Naruto felt sick. "And they don't care?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "The Feudal Lords own all the land, so they will continue to receive all the taxable income from any work done in the village, whether it is Shinobi work or not."

"So you're saying it doesn't matter to them? They don't care as long as they still make money off the land?"

"That's what it means to be a Feudal Lord. Don't assume their intentions are poor. Konoha is less than a hundred years old. The Feudal Lords have been governing the Land of Fire in its entirely for much longer, and in these times of peace, they want to allocate their resources into building up the nation as a whole. A lot of people suffered from the wars besides Shinobi."

Naruto supposed that was true, but it still didn't sit right with him. "But what if they suddenly need Shinobi to defend the nation?"

"The need for military force won't die out completely," Shikamaru said. "But it wouldn't be illogical to downsize Shinobi villages. It wouldn't even be unfathomable for the Feudal Lords to return to a mercenary structure, like the old days. It would be cheaper for them to hire members of clans that train their own—or even just individuals who like to fight—than to support an entire village."

"But the village structure is important," Naruto protested. "Clans become suspicious and violent when they are pitted against each other. The village is necessary to maintain the way we work together and support each other as a community. It is what keeps Shinobi from using others and being used. It's the source of our strength. It's the Will of Fire itself! If they dismantle it-"

" *I* know that," Shikamaru said. " *You* know that. The *clans* know that. But—"

"The Feudal Lords know it too!"

Shikamaru shrugged. "They used to. But things change, Naruto. People forget, and new leaders sometimes have different ideas. The Lords we have now are not the same as even five years ago. And as the Feudal Lords don't live in the village, they don't know this place and its people like you do. Shinobi are just a source of income and protection for them. Only now the protection isn't needed, so they

are just looking at the income. And the numbers don't look good. You have to accept that if you want to solve this problem."

"But—" Naruto's anger was difficult to control. So many objections crowded his mind, he didn't know which one to utter. He tried to make himself listen instead. Shikamaru was saying that, like it or not, it didn't matter how he *felt* about it. The numbers were bad. What next? "Okay. How do we solve it?" he asked.

"I'm thinking on that," Shikamaru said. "Look. Don't panic. Nothing is going to happen overnight. This is just a possibility down the road if things keep going the way they are going. I wasn't even sure I should tell you about it yet. Like I said, this refusal could just be a test to see what you do. Or maybe it is due to temporary money troubles quite independent of us. Give it some time. Let's see if a pattern forms."

Naruto sat back, crossing his arms. Sitting around wasn't his strong point. And what if, by the time a pattern emerged, it was too late? He couldn't—he wouldn't—leave this to Shikamaru. This was the fate of the village. He, Naruto, was the Hokage. It was his village. *He* had to do something.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. Naruto grunted approval for entry.

The Shinobi who entered was a Captain of the Jounin—Sachio Satou. He was Ayame's father.

Naruto wanted to plant his face into the desk. Sachio was one of the most competent Jounin in the village. He was out on missions more than most the other Jounin these days, in part because he was often requested by clients and in part because he didn't seem to know what to do with himself otherwise. He was not scheduled to see the Hokage today, and it was rare that he did anything off schedule. It had to be bad news.

"Sachio," Naruto greeted him.

"My squad has just returned," Sachio said. "I'm set to depart for another mission tonight, but I wanted to talk to you beforehand." His face was completely devoid of emotion. "I heard that my daughter is going up against Yukio on behalf of that boy on her team-the outsider."

Naruto took a deep breath. "Are you concerned about her welfare?"

Sachio returned his gaze placidly. "I'm not concerned."

Naruto chewed the inside of his lip. Sachio was one of those Shinobi that did not always understand Naruto's choices as Hokage. He had grown up in a different environment, conditioned to believe that Shinobi should be tough, always, and never show emotions, not even for his daughter, it seemed. Konohamaru reported that he was always pushing Amaya to excel, sometimes beyond her limits. He hadn't been pleased when Amaya had been placed on Itachi's team, not because she might be burdened, but because he thought her better than that. But he hadn't questioned the Hokage's authority.

Sachio was loyal to the village, and that meant being loyal to the Hokage. That Sachio had come to Naruto to complain about the match was a bad sign. What were the other Jounin saying as the date got closer?

"I'm not concerned about her performance," Sachio explained. "But I don't want Amaya's reputation to suffer on account of that outsider."

"Itachi has a right to prove himself," Naruto answered. "And Amaya volunteered to fight with him. It was her idea for their whole team to face Yukio's whole team."

Sachio's expression remained stoic. "I've heard rumors about the boy's mother," he said.

"We're looking into that," Shikamaru said dryly.

"Are you?" Sachio asked.

Naruto sucked in his breath. That was very close to doubt, if not derision—both of which were unusual for a man of Sachio's loyalty.

"From what I hear," Sachio said, "this woman seduced and used Itachi Uchiha. They say she is dangerous, that her family is wrapped up in dirty dealings—dealings in which Shinobi suffered. Yet you treat her like a friend."

"What are you asking, Sachio?" Shikamaru asked.

"Why haven't you let Ibiki have a session with her?"

"Ibiki?" Naruto demanded.

Shikamaru cast Naruto a sideways glance. "It's not really a terrible idea, Naruto."

Naruto's head whipped in Shikamaru's direction.

"Don't jump to conclusions," Shikamaru said defensively, raising both hands. "I understand your position on Lucia. I didn't say she should be tortured. Ibiki has other talents. Maybe you should let him talk to her. He might be able to read things in her responses that you don't. If nothing else, it would make the Jounin feel better."

Naruto chewed on that for a moment. Ibiki was head of interrogation, and he did have a talent at reading people who didn't want to be read. He could sense emotions others couldn't. He could detect lies that sounded like truth. His work was mostly psychological; he wouldn't have to lay a hand on her.

But it wasn't so clear-cut a decision as it sounded. Maybe Ibiki would learn something. Maybe not. But sending Lucia to Ibiki *would* send a clear message to everyone else—and that message was that the Hokage thought Lucia couldn't be trusted. It would also mean he didn't trust himself, since he had already told everyone he was going to trust her. If he sent Lucia to Ibiki, he might as well chuck her to the Grass. Lucia would understand what was being done, even if he

arranged for a conversation in the most comfortable and nonthreatening of places. So would the other Jounin.

"No," he said, shaking his head at Shikamaru and Sachio both. He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. His heavy Hokage chair. "I won't go back on my word. I know that some of the Jounin are concerned, Sachio, and I respect their caution, but you all have to trust me. I will protect this village. Believe that. Don't worry about Lucia. As for Amaya, she is a Genin who has chosen to fight with her teammates. You should be proud of her."

Sachio didn't say anything. It was difficult to tell if he was contented by Naruto's conviction or troubled. He gave a customary bow, one hand folded under his chest, and let himself out of the office.

Naruto sighed as soon as he was gone. Then he glared at Shikamaru. "Now you don't trust me?"

"I trust you," Shikamaru said. "But you owed *him* an explanation. He's not the only Jounin who has been stewing over this, and as a captain, Sachio will take what you say to the others."

"Do you think *they* will trust me?"

"They will follow your lead as always. You said the right thing. A firm stance is the best course. But Naruto, even though you've decided, it wouldn't hurt for you to be a little more…skeptical of Lucia. On the inside at least."

"I am—"

"I don't think you are. I know you. I think you *want* to believe in her. You *want* to help her. But what if- Naruto, don't look at me like that. I'm not against you. I'm trying to help. We're just talking here. What *if* she is a threat to this village? What if she is as dangerous as the Grass has indicated?"

"They don't know anything more than we do," Naruto said dismissively. "It's Gehard's word against Lucia's."

"That doesn't mean she *isn't* dangerous. Something is off about her. I know you know it. Ibiki would pick that out of her in a second."

Naruto didn't respond. He had already thought about all of this.

"You want to like her for Sasuke's sake," Shikamaru pushed him. "I know you do. You want to think that she's not so bad because you like her kids and you want Sasuke to connect to them. I hope he does. Maybe he'll be less annoying. But Naruto, it's possible for good kids to come from bad parents. What are you going to do if it turns out that what you want just isn't so?"

"What is it you think she might do?" Naruto asked him.

"I don't know, and that is what worries me. She came here asking for help. She indicated that she was abused, on the run, in need of shelter. That makes her sympathetic and I know how you are when it comes to people who need help. You would want to help her—"

"You think it's wrong to help her?" Naruto demanded angrily.

"No, but Naruto, you are pretty famous for it. She could be playing you. That's all I'm saying. When I talked to her myself, I didn't get an impression of a weak woman in need of help. And we know now that she's not really 'abused.' There is something twisted in her and she is after something. Unless I miss my guess, she will cut throats to get it. She is that type."

"Cut throats?" Naruto repeated. He resisted scoffing, though he could see what Shikamaru meant. Lucia was no assassin, not personally, but she was driven and she was cold. Could she step over a body that got in her way?

He had to admit to himself that she probably could, but so could most Shinobi, and he did not live in fear of them, or refuse to help

them. A veneer of coldness didn't make a person heartless. And it didn't automatically indicate a threat. Some people, many Shinobi, became cold in order to get an unpleasant job done. Some Shinobi even developed a permanent chill in the way they dealt with others, to protect a damaged heart from further injury. Sachio was one of them. And sometimes it was the really emotional people who became the coldest. Naruto didn't understand why Sasuke in particular didn't see that.

So in Naruto's mind, the problem wasn't what Lucia exuded, or even what she was after, but why. Why was Lucia so cold? What had she experienced? What did she need? If he could just crack her! Just enough to get a look at her heart... But he wouldn't do it through torture or interrogation. He wouldn't resort to bullying her and risk causing her further injury. Through such methods, even if he learned the truth, it would have the opposite effect from what he wanted. He needed to thaw her, not break her.

Besides which, it might not be possible to break her by violent methods.

After all, Shikamaru had a point about that. She wasn't abused. She was a masochist. In a way, hadn't she already *been* tortured? By Itachi? That pain—even if it was illusionary—must have been as bad, or worse, than anything an interrogator like Ibiki might do to her. Itachi hadn't even wanted information. So—

He froze mid-thought.

Why hadn't that occurred to him before?

"Shikamaru," he said. "I changed my mind. Maybe I do want Ibiki to talk to Lucia."

Shikamaru blinked quizzically at him.

"But I should probably talk to Sakura first," Naruto mused aloud.

"Sakura?" Shikamaru asked. "Why Sakura?"

Naruto put both his hands flat on the Hokage's desk and compared them.

They were indistinguishable. There was no scar on the hand he had stabbed with a kunai knife. But he remembered the feeling, and particularly the emotion behind it. *Pain . See? It's not so scary.*

And his own team had stared at him like he was nuts.

"Can you get her for me?"

"Sasuke! Are you out of your mind?"

Sakura's panicked shout penetrated Itachi's mind seconds before the tell-tale sound of Sasuke's jutsu obscured it. He barely turned in time to act.

Chakra blazed in Sasuke's palm, blue-white like lightning, cracking and whizzing like a firecracker. Trying to hold onto that energy must have been like trying to grasp a panicked cricket the size of a small dog.

Itachi recognized it. He had seen this jutsu before.

Chidori was a killing move.

Itachi jumped backward, twisting in midair to avoid the blow. The ground seemed to swoop above him as he rotated. He landed on the balls of his feet, chakra-enforced toes digging into the dirt.

But there was nothing for his heels to fall on. He toppled backward, arms wind-milling, but it was too late for balance. Somehow, he had forgotten to mark the edge of the cliff. He fell.

Sasuke seized him by his mesh shirt.

Heart hammering, Itachi stared into Sasuke's face. His uncle's expression was intense—black eyes focused, the corners of his mouth turned down, and his lips pressed tightly together. Sasuke lifted Itachi bodily so that his feet dangled over the ground just above the ledge.

"You're too slow."

Sasuke's voice held little emotion.

Itachi barely had time to gather his chakra, and brace himself, before Sasuke flung him into the dirt. He crumbled to the ground, body splayed over tree roots that jabbed against his ribs.

Itachi's whole right side throbbed from the impact, but he pushed the pain down, got to his feet, and lifted himself into a crouch. He turned to face Sasuke, kunai knives positioned for blocking.

Sasuke's lips twitched slightly upwards.

"Sakura!" It was a voice calling out from behind Sasuke on the other side of the glen. "The Hokage wants to see you."

Sakura and Sasuke both turned their heads.

Itachi didn't take his eyes off Sasuke, not trusting that his uncle wouldn't attack while a visitor was watching, but he could still see the Jounin who approached them, a man with hair pulled up into a topknot and both hands shoved into his pockets.

"Can't it wait?" Sakura asked anxiously. "Will it take long?"

The man just shrugged and rolled his eyes. "How should I know?"

Itachi cursed the interruption. He had taken a lot of damage and wished there hadn't been a reprieve. Having stopped, even for less than a minute of respite, he found he could barely hold himself upright.

Just don't throw up, he thought frantically.

While he fought with himself, Sakura seemed to reach a conclusion. After a few quiet words with Sasuke, she left the training grounds with the Jounin who had come looking for her.

Sasuke turned to look at Itachi, expression unreadable. Itachi swallowed and braced himself. He had to constantly remind himself of the purpose of all of this.

Training with Sasuke was a constant exercise in trying to survive—ten times worse than Sakura's Genin test. But it was working. After only three weeks, his taijutsu was hardly recognizable for what it had been. Weapons felt familiar in his hands now—almost too familiar. He could hit moving targets now. He could hit targets while falling. He could block or evade hits coming at him. He had to learn to do all of that, because every time he failed, Sasuke thrashed him.

As a teacher, Sasuke didn't pull any punches. Itachi had sustained more injuries in three weeks than he could count, including shocks and stab wounds, even poison-all of it healed by Sakura when necessary so he could keep training.

Sasuke had made it clear that he could give up at any time. If it was too much, he could stop coming. In some ways, Itachi felt that Sasuke was trying to make him give up. But Itachi kept coming day after day to ask Sasuke to train him, even though every day he was injured worse than the day before. He hoped it was making a positive impression on Sasuke—at least a little.

But even if it wasn't, he was at least getting better.

It wasn't only taijutsu. He could do a grand fireball consistently now. Sasuke had been very thorough in testing that he could do it not only whenever he wanted, but wherever he happened to be. Just like taijutsu, Sasuke forced him to learn to do it on the run, while falling from a height, when shuriken were flying at him-

Genjutsu was a work in progress, but it was coming along. He could break a simple Genjutsu easily now—every time. Actually, Sakura had been more help with Genjutsu than Sasuke. Sasuke's Sharingan was apparently so fierce that he hardly had to try. He saw through any illusion immediately, could cast one with minimal effort, and struggled to explain how either was done. Sakura, who did not have any special tricks to combat Genjutsu but her wits, gave Itachi more comprehensive instruction. But it was Sasuke who pushed him to use every ounce of what he knew.

Now that Sakura wasn't here, Itachi would have to be even more careful not to be hit. Because he was pretty sure Sasuke wasn't going to cut him a break.

"Will you teach me a new jutsu?" he asked.

Sasuke's eyes flickered at him.

Itachi licked his lips. He had been wanting to ask this for awhile now.

"Will you teach me Chidori?"

"No," Sasuke said.

"Why not?"

"There's no point with you. I heard what you did. Stop it at once."

Itachi closed his eyes.

He probably shouldn't have asked. His arm still felt like jelly. It trembled from the shoulder to the tips of his fingers. That had happened because he had tried to teach himself lightning jutsu yesterday, just so he could learn Chidori. He shouldn't have done it. He had almost destroyed his arm. Sakura had been furious. He had been on his back for hours. That was the real reason he had been so long getting home last night.

But Itachi felt embarrassed more than anything.

Itachi had hoped Sasuke would teach him Chidori. It was one of Sasuke's signature moves and Itachi remembered seeing it—and being amazed—the day he arrived in the village.

"Why not?" he asked. "It's because it's your move, right? You don't want me-"

"It's not my move. It was taught to me by Kakashi Hatake. The reason I won't teach it you is because Chidori is useless if you don't have a Sharingan. It is a lethal jutsu, but it leaves the attacker vulnerable. You have to be quick. You aren't quick enough. Besides which, one attempt would drain most of your chakra. You aren't ready for that level."

That was a surprising answer. Itachi supposed it should make him feel better, but relief didn't come. He still wanted to learn Chidori, even if it was pointless.

Itachi rubbed his arm. "Yukio's going to kill me," he muttered.

He wished he could have the words back as soon as they left his mouth. It might have sounded surly to Sasuke. Whiny. He felt that way, if truth be told, but it was because he felt *so* tired. Still, he shouldn't have let it show.

But Sasuke only looked away, frowning into the distance at nothing.

"Weight training might help," Sasuke said suddenly. "Speed will give you an advantage. I hadn't thought of that. We can try it."

Weight training? Itachi didn't object, but it did sound…heavy. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

Sasuke looked back at him. His dark eyes were difficult to read. "Let's break for today," he said. "I have some things to do. We can start with weights tomorrow."

Itachi stared. Usually, they would go for hours yet. Was it *obvious* he was falling apart? Or did Sasuke really have other things to do? Itachi didn't know if he should ask.

"Where's that sister of yours?" Sasuke asked, frowning as his eyes darted around the clearing. "She didn't come today."

"I don't know. She said she had a test."

It had concerned him too when she didn't show up for his practice with Sasuke. She had come every day so far, as soon as school let out, but she had mentioned having a test and he wasn't sure if that meant her schedule was different.

"She'll be back tomorrow?"

"I think so."

Itachi was puzzled. He didn't think Sasuke had noticed Rina, or cared whether she was there or not. She might have been one of the stumps or logs for all the attention he paid her.

Maybe Sasuke was getting…used to them? Hope bubbled up in Itachi's throat. He forced it down.

He had promised not to strain the relationship.

The silence stretched.

"Tomorrow then," Sasuke said, and turned away. He vanished between blinks.

Itachi stood alone in the clearing. He knew that if he sat down he would not get back up, so he made himself walk. He staggered home.

When he was arrived, the house was empty, but there was a note on the counter. He read it, rubbing his arm, which still felt loose and rubbery.

Rina's teacher has requested a meeting. I'll be home by dinner.

Itachi had to read it a couple of times. It annoyed him that he had to do that because the message wasn't complicated. He didn't know what was wrong with his head. After a training session with Sasuke, sometimes he just couldn't understand anything for a few hours. His head was…too full or something.

Still, he wondered why Rina needed a parent-teacher meeting. Was she not getting her work done? Maybe he should tell her not to come anymore.

"I can't worry about Rina," he muttered to no one. "I have enough to worry about."

More sleep would help, but sleep came roughly for him lately. He went to bed exhausted and still spent some nights just staring at the ceiling, his mind turning, thinking of all he had to learn, and all he wasn't learning fast enough.

He didn't feel like he was going to get sick. Remembering his Academy test, he was being very careful in that regard, but he did feel… stretched. The inside of his head seemed to be shimmering, so much so that he felt that any moment the rest of him might shatter into tiny, glittering fragments.

It was just stress. And he only had to keep it up a few days more. In less than a week, he would face Yukio.

He trudged up to his room, where he removed his head band, his ninja gear, his outer jacket, and his shoes. He dropped them all on the floor, leaving them where they lay, and turned to stare at the bed.

A tiny pinging sound pulled his attention to the window.

A pebble?

Crossing the room, he slid the glass panes apart and looked down.

A familiar face stared up at him, but it took him a second to recognize her.

"Amaya?"

She wasn't wearing her ninja gear. Amaya was *always* garbed for combat, so he didn't know what to make of her civilian clothes—a white, V-neck tank top and a short, pleated skirt. She wore slipper shoes instead of her usual boots, so her pale legs were bare from ankle to thigh. Was there gloss on her lips?

"Can I come up?"

Lucia's attention was centered on the note she held in her hand.

It had been delivered to her home by a child, signed by Rina's Academy teacher Tenten.

Ms. Van Alstyne, if at all possible, can you come to the school to pick up Rina today? I will hold her after class. There is something I'd like to discuss.

Notes from teachers were always ominous. Whenever Lucia had been summoned by a teacher before now, it was because Itachi had gotten in a fight at school. Those fights had often been on her account, and the notes were all pretty much the same—polite and vague. But Rina had never been the cause of a conference.

Her trip through town was marked by stares and whispers, some of them impolite, others merely curious. They all knew it was on her account that her son was slotted to fight Yukio in the upcoming match, and that the Grass would be in attendance. She knew too that the rumors had followed her.

She walked without acknowledging them.

The wing where the Academy students Rina's age had their lessons was on the west side of the school building. Class had let out early in accordance with an exam schedule, so Lucia walked down empty hallways, following the numbers on the doors until she came to Tenten's classroom. The door was open, so she walked through without announcing herself.

Tenten sat on top of one of the desks, speaking softly to Rina, who sat in the adjacent seat, face buried in her arms.

Tenten turned when she entered. "Oh, hello. Welcome," she said, and smiled brightly. "Thank you for coming. I'm sorry to have to call you in so unexpectedly."

"Not at all."

At Tenten's gesture, Lucia walked up the steps to where the student desks stretched out in tiered rows. She sat on the other side of her daughter.

"What happened?" Lucia asked.

Rina still hadn't moved.

"I'm afraid Rina is failing."

"Failing? Rina?"

She wanted to say 'that's impossible,' but it wasn't impossible. It was just surprising. Rina had always done well in school. "Has she been struggling?"

"She was doing well at first, but she's been doing poorly recently," Tenten said, "and she really botched the assessment test today."

"Assessment test?"

"It's a skills test. There's a written exam and a physical exam."

Lucia glanced at Rina. "You didn't tell me you had a test."

When Rina didn't respond, Lucia turned back to Tenten. "Did she do poorly on the physical exam?"

"She did poorly on both. I'm sorry to say it. She is a good kid. She never causes any problems and she seems to be listening, but she was in the bottom percentile. I was surprised, to tell you the truth. I had no idea she was so lost."

"Rina can be very quiet," Lucia affirmed. "Sometimes it is hard to tell when she needs help."

Rina pulled her arms in tighter around her head. She didn't make a sound.

"Are you feeling pressured, Rina?" Lucia asked her daughter. "Is it too hard for you? Too different from what you're used to?"

No response.

"Rina, you need to help me here. Look up."

Rina turned her face just enough so that Lucia could see one eye and a single tear-stained cheek. She looked miserable.

Lucia breathed deeply. "What can I do to help you?"

"Nothing," Rina bleated. The word dropped out of her mouth in a mumble. Tears welled up in her eyes. "I'll do better."

"You will?"

Her daughter buried her face into her arms and nodded.

"How much better?" Lucia asked. "I want you to set a goal, Rina. I will reward you if you reach it."

Rina didn't respond.

Tenten smiled sympathetically at Lucia. "Is there any reason outside of school that she might be falling behind? I know that her brother is going to be in a match."

Lucia pursed her lips. "She is watching him train every moment she's not in school. Rina, did you hear what Tenten said?"

Rina only shrugged.

Lucia sighed. "Rina, I don't want you going out to watch Itachi train anymore—"

Rina's head jerked up. Tears still shown on her face, but she turned to Lucia with panicked urgency. "No!"

"If you can't keep up—"

"I'm sorry! I'll do better, I promise! Top percentile."

Lucia froze. She had been about to bargain something like two grades higher for a good prize, a lesser prize for one grade higher, but not top percentile. "You think you can get top percentile?"

"If I do, can I train with Itachi?"

"Rina," Lucia warned, "if you are stressed out already and not able to complete your homework, then you need to set a realistic goal. I don't want you to-"

"I can do it. I can do it. Please? Can I please please please study with Itachi if I do it? Top percentile. I promise."

Tenten looked astonished. "No one expects you to go from last to first. Why don't you retake the test first, Rina?" Tenten said gently. "Maybe today was just a bad day. You can practice over the weekend and retake the test on Monday. We can talk about your overall grade after that."

Rina scrubbed one hand across her eyes and nodded.

Tenten smiled.

But Lucia wasn't satisfied. "Rina," she said, this time a little sharply. "Answer me this: Are you failing on purpose?"

Rina's back stiffened. Her fingers clenched against the surface of the desk, her fingernails whitening. Tears leaked from her eyes. She hiccupped.

Tenten looked startled. "On purpose?"

Lucia sighed. "Am I right? Rina?"

Sasuke walked home, knowing Sakura wouldn't be there to welcome him, knowing that nothing would be. Despite what he had told the boy, he had little to do. It would be a dull day.

But he had no choice. Sakura had told him about Itachi's ill-adventure into lightning jutsu. The kid had almost fried himself the night before. As a result, his reactions were slower today, especially that arm. Sasuke had to call it off early. If the boy collapsed, they would lose too much time in his recovery. And Itachi needed more training. He was getting to a place where he wouldn't look stupid, but he wasn't nearly good enough to beat Yukio.

Sasuke supposed it was partly his fault the boy had injured himself. He knew Itachi wanted to impress him. The kid needn't have tried to teach himself dangerous techniques. Sasuke was impressed. He had never seen a kid work so hard. But he hadn't said anything about it, even though it ought to have been an easy thing to say. 'Good job today.' It wasn't even personal, but the words simply wouldn't come. He just couldn't talk to the kid.

Even more unsettling was the presence of the little girl.

Something about her. She was always watching. Some days she just scribbled on that paper of hers, but other days he had the sensation

that she was logging into her mind every move Sasuke made, and everything he said. It was unnerving. Sakura said she was a sweet child, and Sasuke could see a gentleness about her, but there was also cleverness, and secrecy, and a quiet arrogance.

It made him uneasy. He thought about sending her away. Since when were strangers allowed to sit and watch Shinobi fights? But something stayed his hand.

Then, last night, he had had a dream. It had caused him to scream in his sleep, startling Sakura, whose soft hands and gentle whispers brought him out of the dark haze. She assumed he had a nightmare, as he had them often, but this was different from the usual.

This time, he dreamed he was training the younger Itachi. That had never happened before, even though his days were consumed with it. He dreamed they were in the glen, and Itachi was improving at a far more rapid rate than happened in reality, acquiring jutsus right and left, even things it made no sense for him to know. Sasuke had felt for sure he was going to succeed, all because of his training.

Then it occurred to him to wonder where the girl Rina was. He turned to look for her. What he saw shocked him.

His brother had appeared in the glen. He stood there, watching, friendly and silent, like he had come to pick up the children and was just waiting for practice to be over. The little girl stood next to him, held by the hand. Sasuke had felt confusion, and elation, and revulsion, all at once.

It had been a long time since Sasuke had been able to conjure a concrete image of Itachi Uchiha. After ten years, even the memories he clung to had started to fade. But the dream Itachi was defined in every nuance. And fluid. It was like he was really there. He wore all black, his hair tied behind him, and there was a Konoha headband hanging loosely around his neck. Sasuke had stared at him for awhile, absorbing every detail.

He asked his brother a question, as if he were a real person. "You're taking them with you?"

Itachi Uchiha didn't respond, but the younger Itachi joined Sasuke's brother as if he were expected. He knelt by his sister, speaking to her quietly as he often did, checking that she had everything, as if they were going on a trip. Itachi Uchiha put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Sasuke was overcome by horror. "Don't," he said to his brother. "Not where you're going!"

His brother spoke to the kids. He spoke with words Sasuke couldn't hear or understand. The kids looked at him, wide-eyed, and followed him out of the glen. Itachi Uchiha smiled at Sasuke over his shoulder, as if to say 'don't worry about it. I've got them now.'

"Don't take them!" Sasuke shouted.

"Sasuke, wake up! It's a dream," Sakura whispered, one hand on his chest, her voice urgent but soft in his ear. He was in bed, trembling in the dark, alone with Sakura. "No one is taking anybody."

It had taken a few hours before he could shake the dream. His nightmares were changing. They had been the same for years. He wondered what it meant.

Had Naruto been right? Was he bonding with the children? Did he not want to lose them? Or was he just terrified of a nonsense idea—like Itachi Uchiha showing up and taking them, or anyone, into the grave where Sasuke could not follow?

Whatever it was, he couldn't deny that working with these kids day in and day out was having an effect on him. Sasuke felt raw after a training session with the boy, and more than a little uncertain of his footing, but he couldn't argue it was a bad feeling. Because of these kids, the dynamic of his world-his static, unchanging world, full of

familiar faces-had been given a shove. He was doing something new.

And he didn't hate it.

But he didn't want to like it either. It was painful, and compromising. They were becoming more attached to him, and he didn't want that. He worried what the future held. Should their mother turn out to be a threat, as he had to constantly remind Naruto, what would happen then?

Kakashi had never seen opulence like what he saw in Lucia's country.

An entire street of inhabitants in Konoha could live comfortably in one of the houses on her block. He couldn't help feeling a little sickened by it, knowing as he did how people in the Land of Fire were suffering, Konoha citizens among them.

And those were the lower houses.

The high houses—as they were called—were physically not much larger than the lower, but the families that occupied them were reputedly worth more, sometimes exponentially more, than their neighbors.

The Van Alstyne family was a higher house. And Lucia, it seemed, was the sole inheritor of its fortune.

People didn't like her here either.

In fact, it didn't take much poking around for Kakashi to learn something that surprised him: Gehard Barculo was the popular one.

Most everyone recognized that Gehard had a bit of a problem with philandering, drinking and gambling, but these seemed to be acceptable vices, dismissed with a shrug or a grunt. Sociably,

opinion turned in his favor. Lucia was, by contrast, said to be cold—unfriendly, uncaring, and ruthless.

Most of what Kakashi heard about Lucia concerned money. And not just her family inheritance. Rumor ran that Lucia sought other people's money. If she had her eye on something, she went after it, whatever it took, whoever she hurt. She had enemies aplenty, as it was said she used harsh tactics to wrestle away assets the former owners had not wanted to relinquish it…especially to her. It was even said that some families' fortunes had been "crushed" by her dealings. They included her neighbors and people she had grown up with. So she was, by most accounts, a shark.

Of course, Kakashi wanted a variety of perspectives. Most of those who talked had never dealt with Lucia personally. He wanted the accounts of people who knew her, people who interacted with her on a daily basis. Unfortunately, there were surprisingly few such people to be found.

So he did what seemed natural to him. He went to her school and asked her teachers what she had been like as a girl.

"She wasn't always like that," a man who had been Lucia's economics teacher had told him. "Before her parents died, she was… well, I don't want to say *sweet* , but she was approachable. And always fair. She was a great communicator, Lucia. She never put her personal opinions out front, but she had the ability to get other people talking. She kept groups on task. And she was bright. Might have been the sharpest to come through these halls."

"Might be?"

"It was hard to tell. She never did more than she had to do to get the grade. Her grades were always very high, mind, but you could tell she had little passion for course work. School was a small concern. I suspect it was because her father grilled her pretty hard at home."

"Grilled her?"

"Most the kids in these classes learn business, accounting, economics, law, and then take over the family business, or join firms, or start their own companies. Lucia's future was laid out for her, being a Van Alstyne and all. She seemed excited about it…then. But when her father died—murdered, some say—she withdrew. Her mother pulled her out of school and married her off."

These nuggets motivated Kakashi to inquire deeper into the history Van Alstyne family. He soon found that everyone, even the folk who lived in outlying villages, had an opinion.

"Yeah. They're one of the big ones," a bartender had told him. Kakashi went in for a drink in the afternoon, when the place was empty. "You know. Rich. Top of the hill."

Kakashi had feigned disinterest.

"What I hear, though," the bartender explained, "is that the money is blood money. Comes from killings. And it begets killings. There's an old story about bodies buried under the floors of the Van Alstyne estate."

"Really?"

The bartender shrugged, wiping down drinking glasses and setting them aside. "Rumor, isn't it? Never been inside the place myself, but I'm sure you wouldn't see evidence of anything like that. It'd be all marble and polish and silver, wouldn't it?"

Kakashi verified this as fact.

Infiltrating Lucia's former home was surprisingly easy, except for one hitch: Gehard Barculo returned to the country while he was about it. Fortunately, Gehard did not stay long. After he left, all Kakashi had to avoid was the servants. The house was enormous, and just like the bartender said, beautiful, but sterile. There were no bones to be found, nor anything else that could be described as incriminating.

As for Gehard, Kakashi learned that he departed as quickly as he arrived. He was not able to ascertain what he had come back for, though he did hear that he left with larger group of people. Some of them were members of the high houses; others the lower. And there was a few oddities, including children who weren't—in any way Kakashi could determine—connected to any of it. Diligently, he discovered all their names and affiliations to bring to Naruto, in case it was important.

Once Gehard had left, Kakashi took it upon himself to visit Gehard's mistress, a slight blonde woman named Sasha. He showed up at her house pretending to be a handyman, and with a few smiles and an attentive ear, got her talking without much effort. She melted into tears over the whole situation.

"It's her fault! That woman…that horrible woman! But Gehard… He had to go after her, didn't he? He can't even *divorce* her. It's not *fair* !"

"Why not?" Kakashi asked. The woman had no idea, of course, who Kakashi was, and she apparently didn't care. Sshe seemed more than eager to talk—to anyone who would listen.

"Because of me," she sobbed. "I love him, I do! But I'm the mistress, so we can't be together. It's so stupid. Everyone knows, even *her* . I know Gehard's not perfect, but he loves me. He would marry me if he could. He told me so. But he can't. It's the money. Gehard needs it. Don't tell anyone I told you this, but the Barculos don't have enough to shore up their debt. If not for the Van Alstynes they will lose everything. People say *she* was forced to marry Gehard, but it goes both ways, you know? He didn't have a choice either. If he tries, she can cut him off with *nothing* ." She hiccupped.

"So that's why he has to get her back then?" Kakashi said.

Sasha nodded, hiding her face in a silk handkerchief.

Others confirmed her story.

"He went to some country in the east," another woman told him when he offered to buy her a drink. She was married into one of the lower houses and seemed to have a strong perspective. "Chasing that errant wife of his. Took a bunch of families with him who have a stake in it. Never trust a Van Alstyne! They'll do anything, and bury anyone, to turn a profit. They say Lucia went that way before, some time ago. Maybe she made some money off the turmoil over there. That would be like her-profiting off of other people's suffering."

Kakashi felt a jolt. He wondered- The Great Ninja War?

The woman didn't notice. "Chaos spells opportunity for people like the Van Alstynes. Everyone is desperate. Everyone is scared. They want money. Money for weapons, for defense. People that frightened will take money from anyone at any cost, and at any debt. The Van Alstynes give it to them, and then collect collect collect."

Kakashi spent some time contemplating this.

Lucia claimed to have known who Itachi Uchiha was because she obtained a bingo book from Shinobi guards her father had hired. But what if it went deeper than that? If the Van Alstyne family had profited from the Great Ninja War, or several wars, by lending money to various groups over the years, then they could be considered the client behind the client. They might even have funded Akatsuki.

And if they were still collecting money from those loans, that would better explain why Lucia had a bingo book, and why she had been in the Fire Nation—twice. She hadn't traveled hundreds of thousands of miles just to get pregnant, though that did seem to have been one item on her agenda.

It was a lot of 'ifs' but Kakashi wondered: had *Itachi Uchiha* known any of this? Did he suspect? Between two possible children two years apart, he would have had the time and the connections to uncover the same rumors. He must have looked into it. So why? Itachi was too thorough, too much a man of careful planning…and

then contingency planning…to have indulged in such a dangerous connection haphazardly. So what had Itachi Uchiha been thinking to *allow* this woman—a woman whose family may have funded the war he hated—to produce children by him?

Kakashi had no idea.

But the mystery was enough that he absolved not to return to Konoha, not just yet, even though he worried about what Gehard might be up to.

There was at least one more person he wanted to see.

He had to travel into the country to find her. Kakashi had learned something about the woman before taking the trip, which served him. Judging from her sprawling, country estate, he never would have guessed that Lucia's sister had disinherited herself through marriage.

He had prepared a series of maneuvers to gain entry to her home, but to his surprise, she greeted him cordially and invited him in without a fuss. She led him to her sun room, where she served a platter of sweet breads and jam and berry-flavored tea.

Kakashi smiled through his mask, his one visible eye squinting. "Thank you so much for seeing me, Ms. -?"

"You may call me Cecile," the woman murmured.

She sat on a sofa across from him. She was a pretty woman, with porcelain skin and dark, curly hair like her sister, but plumper and cheerier. She was older than Lucia, too, by ten years or so. She was also direct.

"So," Cecile said. "You must be from this Leaf Village?"

Kakashi froze with one hand extended toward a crumpet. "Have you been expecting me?"

"Not exactly," Cecile said. "I just recognize that symbol." She pointed to his forehead protector, which he wore around his arm. "You are here about my sister?" She lifted a cup of tea and took a sip, raising her eyebrows at him over the cup.

"Yes," Kakashi said. "Since you know who I am, can I ask you a direct question?"

"I will answer all of your questions."

"Is Lucia a threat to Konoha?"

"Oh yes."

TBC

Thank you for reading! Once again, this chapter might be seen as **Part 1 of a two part special** . I ramp up a number of situations in this first half—and conclude them in the second half (I think?). To help me cover all my bases, please review this chapter. I would especially appreciate insight into what you think might happen in the second half, as that will help me cover all of my bases.

I don't expect everyone to like this story or all the characters in this story, but if you reviewed and didn't flame me, I hope that means you enjoy reading it. This story takes a lot of risks and it's getting even more risky (I'm a little nervous about reception actually), so please let me know what you think of developments around any or all of the following:

-What Naruto is after in having Ibiki question Lucia…or not

-Amaya (first time we see any depth to this character)

-Everything Itachi is dealing with

-Rina failing

-Sasuke's dream and other problems

-Kakashi's investigation

Feedback keeps me writing!

Big thanks to reviewers last chapter:

aNgelik aYis; -00-night-eyes-00- ;Blade Redwind; Suddon (sorry for making you wait so long!); ChocolateAddict; Mirra; MizuiroNeko; A Random; Shkh4ever; InnerSakura101; Paige O.; Jeshii-san; CookieCrumbleMilkSplash0331; Joy-girl; Derrand59; Roguefan212000 (glad you like SasuSaku in this story!); zhusanna (yay! Such a long review!); Cece and Tems; IVIaedhros (you're back!); KnightWolfe (good to see you again!); First Weaver; Dark Inu Fan; UchihaKeiko93; bluetopaz83 (I love your reviews T_T); arch-nsha; Twisted Musalih; Delbi 18 (thank you for reviewing even though you don't like to! I really appreciate it); Magical Poof; hymnia (I love warming your heart cockles!); anonesque; littlefreakshow; Kano13; Lifestyle; The Violent Tomboy; Dionysos (love this review!); Rin-elwin; anna707; Melodi Moon; Owl-sama (thank you so much! Great review); Dual Hunters; Satoshi (welcome!)

People who didn't review Chapter 12, I hope you are still reading!

Chapter 14

Thank you, everyone, for waiting this long. I know I promised that this chapter would be uploaded 'pretty quickly' behind the last one. I didn't know at that time that I was going to fall in love this summer. I fell in love, for the first time, two weeks after I posted the last chapter. This has been both wonderful and terrible, as I can't be with the person I love (at least not right now), and in my anxiety, I have been very distracted. I have found it difficult to write much of anything that isn't about him. This was very bad at first. It has gotten better bit by bit. You may read about it on my livejournal if you friend Zapenstap, though some updates are necessary.

As for White Rain, it is progressing as I envisioned regardless of this issue. As always, I am not sure how this chapter will be received. This story takes a lot of risks and this chapter is no exception. I do hope you enjoy it.

White Rain

Chapter 14

By Zapenstap

Naruto paced the room, fiddling with knick knacks on the desk and shelves, aware of Sakura's eyes on him—glaring.

Having come directly from Sasuke's training with Itachi, she was dressed for combat, and more than a little out of temper at having been pulled away.

Naruto didn't want to incense her further.

Sakura was always volatile, liable to swing from sweet to snappish in an instant, but she seemed even more on edge in general of late, so her readiness to throw punches made him a little nervous. Especially given what he wanted to talk about.

Her hands were on her hips, her weight shifted over one leg—a bad sign. "Why did you call me in, Naruto?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About this idea I have. Regarding Lucia."

She sighed expressively. "Couldn't it wait? I don't like leaving Sasuke alone with Itachi."

Naruto blinked. He hadn't considered that. "You think it's dangerous?"

"No. No. I just want to be there. Sasuke can get a bit…rough… on the kid."

"Is the training helping?"

She looked confused. "Is the training helping Itachi? Or Sasuke?"

"Er…both."

"Itachi's getting better. Pushing himself too hard, if you ask me, but he is improving."

"Is it helping Sasuke?"

Sakura bit her lip. "I don't know. He's tense—really tense—and withdrawn. He won't talk to me about what he feels, but if I had to guess, I think it *is* helping. He seems less…angry."

Naruto thought a minute about that.

"What is your idea about Luica?" Sakura asked him.

Naurto took a deep breath. He couldn't put it off forever. "It's about her masochism. And well…everything else."

"You think you have a lead?"

"Shikamaru suggested letting Ibiki talk to her."

Sakura's eyes widened. "Ibiki? Naruto, I'm no fan of Lucia's, but I don't know if that's a good idea."

He waved his hands defensively. "You misunderstand. I don't want him to question her. Well, I do want him to ask her questions, but not like you might think."

Sakura just looked confused.

"Sakura, do you remember when you told me I was a masochist? When we were Genin on our first real mission?"

Now Sakura looked flabbergasted. "Naruto! Is this your idea? You can't *always* understand someone else's experience through your own experience! Stabbing your hand wasn't masochism! I know I *said* it was, but that's because I looked down on you then. I was being facetious anyway. It's totally different from Lucia's situation. You don't let other people beat up on you. You don't like pain."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "I'm not suggesting it's the same. But thinking about it gave me an idea. Just hear me out, okay? I wanted to talk to you because you give good advice."

She looked somewhat mollified. Compliments had that affect on Sakura. "Go on then."

"What I'm thinking is that the *reason* I stabbed my hand might not be all that different from Lucia's."

She crossed her arms. "You think Lucia was angry she wasn't a great ninja despite all the training she put into it?"

"You're thinking too literally."

"You think she doesn't want to be weak?"

Naruto felt sure she was goading him on purpose, but he wasn't discouraged. "I stabbed my hand because it was poisoned, right?"

Sakura looked at him frankly.

"But I didn't hurt myself because I *liked* pain. Don't you see?" Naruto said. "I swore an oath of pain that I would achieve my goal. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it, even if it hurt, even if it killed me."

"You think Lucia wants to be stronger?"

"Something like that."

"Lucia's not a ninja, Naruto."

"But she *does* have a mission. She wants something. We all know it. I'm not saying it makes sense. Probably she would agree that it doesn't. But what did stabbing my hand accomplish? Nothing. I almost passed out. In a way, though, it made me feel better."

Sakura chewed her lower lip. "I still think it's different. She's a privileged woman. What pain would she have to endure that she didn't seek it out? She said she let her husband abuse her. And she urged Itachi to do the same. I think she does like pain. She must. What you are suggesting just seems…far-fetched. Even if she did have some thought like you're saying, it's still crazy, and it wouldn't make what Itachi did to her any…nobler. Sadism is just another word for cruelty. It's abuse. It's warped. And encouraging someone to do it? I'm sorry, but it is disgusting."

Naruto grimaced. Maybe she was right, but he kept thinking of what he had been feeling when Sakura had called him a masochist. He had thought that if he could persevere through pain, he would prove he was not afraid, and then he could get stronger. Enduring that pain had given him a high, even as it made him dizzy. He felt powerful. For a second, it made him believe that if he got strong enough, he could get what he wanted. But he was a fighter. What if you feared

you *couldn't* become strong enough? What if *all* you thought you could do was take the oath?

"Sakura," he said. "What do you do if you're in a fight and the enemy outnumbers you?"

"Is this a rhetorical question? Are we still talking about Lucia?"

"Just imagine that you're in a situation—maybe not a battle—but some kind of situation where the enemy is very powerful and you're weak."

She regarded him askance. He could tell that she saw where he was going. "Take up a defensive position and ambush, raid, and otherwise make small hits that accumulate to massive damage," she said. "If engaged, use evasive action and misdirection. Or if it's an organization, you can infiltrate, I suppose, and sabotage."

"And if you're fighting all alone?"

He could see her struggling. "The same. But it's diversionary. You would need power to turn the tables eventually. If you can't cut the enemy down, you have to get bigger. That's all there is to it. If you are too weak, all you can do is just buy time until you are strong. If you are alone, it might take a long time."

Naruto nodded. "Like…maybe ten years?"

"What are you suggesting?" Sakura asked. Now she sounded alarmed. "Do you think Lucia is going to try and defeat Konoha? Undermine it from the inside? Why would she want to do that?"

He frowned. He wasn't sure he knew how to explain what he was thinking.

There were so many pieces, and Lucia's world was so different from Naruto's world that it was difficult for him to grasp. He knew Lucia saw power in a different way than he did. What she did as a banker

sounded so boring Naruto's eyes wanted to glaze over, but he did listen. And he understood. In her world, money was power.

"She's alone. She doesn't trust us," Naruto muttered, mostly to himself. "That's why she doesn't tell us anything. Or maybe she can't. I don't know."

"Because what she wants might not be *good* , Naruto," Sakura said.

"I know. I know." Naruto rubbed his hands furiously through his hair as if by doing so he could shake together all the disconnected thoughts.

A knock sounded at the door.

"It's Ibiki."

Sakura looked even more worried as Ibiki entered the room. Konoha's top interrogator crossed his arms and frowned at Naruto from a crisscross of scars that covered his face.

"Shikamaru told me that you want me to question Lucia?" Ibiki asked him. "I thought that you had decided not to interrogate her."

"I don't want you to question her. I want you to listen to what she has to say."

"About what?"

Naruto took a deep breath and avoided looking at Sakura. "I want her to tell you in detail, as much as she's willing, exactly how Itachi tortured her. I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner."

Sakura paled. "What does that accomplish?"

Naruto kept his eyes on Ibiki.

Ibiki merely looked thoughtful. "I heard she was a masochist," he said. "That's one of the rumors going around."

"You have experience with that type?" Naruto asked him.

"Some. Masochists derive pleasure from being punished, but it's not as simple as it sounds. Often, it comes from a desire for control."

"How is a masochist in control?" Sakura demanded. "Aren't they the one being beaten?"

"If it's masochism, and not just victimization, then it has to be consensual, which means the masochist has the power to let it continue or to stop it. So yes, they have power. Of course, so does the sadist, as masochism has the potential to turn to victimization."

Sakura only frowned. "How would being beaten make you feel powerful?"

"Some people derive pleasure from the feeling of being used. The pain itself can be extremely addictive, partly due to the endorphins released. And some masochists get a sense of accomplishment from it."

" *Accomplishment* ?" Sakura exclaimed.

"From forcing another human being into cruelty. It's a thrill to dehumanize someone. Sadists certainly feel that, but it goes both ways." He looked at Naruto. "You want me to determine what type Lucia is? What turns her on?"

Naruto nodded. "If she's willing to talk about it."

At this, Sakura looked sick. She turned worried eyes on Naruto. "I think this will upset Sasuke, Naruto. I don't think it's a good idea. Especially with Itachi's match looming-"

"Well, he doesn't have to hear about it, at least not right now," Naruto conceded. "But I still think we need to ask Lucia about this issue, and depending what she says to Ibiki, and what Ibiki thinks of it, I do think Sasuke should hear the results of the evaluation."

Sakura looked dubious, but Naruto felt even more certain about his hunch. Sasuke had been thrown into such despair that Lucia had sought a tryst with Itachi just because she wanted someone to torture her. The question weighed on his mind. Naruto couldn't keep the answer from him, but he couldn't deny that he was hoping for a particular conclusion from Ibiki.

Kakashi almost dropped his teacup. "Lucia wants to harm Konoha?"

Cecile shrugged. "She is in a position where she could. She has the resources, and the leverage, to do a great many things."

Kakashi decided to take a crumpet after all. He set one on his plate and stared at it for a few moments before he spoke. "I don't suppose you will tell me what leverage she has exactly?"

Cecile smiled.

"I've been trying to understand her better by talking to people here," Kakashi said, "but all I've really learned is that people from her homeland don't seem to like her much, and possibly worse, than people in my land."

"Of course they don't. A rich, beautiful woman? She doesn't have to do anything to be hated."

"But she has done things."

"Yes, she has."

"As her sister, you must know what. And why."

"Lucia is bright and ambitious. She is also secretive, even from me."

"Do *you* dislike her?"

"She is my sister. To me, Lucia is like the snow—cold, yes, and quiet, but also pure."

"Her teachers say she was not always cold."

"They are probably remembering her popularity with the boys. Lucia was one of those girls who always had a boyfriend—from as early as, oh, nine or ten, I think. She was beautiful and interesting to them. So was I. We both developed early. You know how that goes."

Kakashi didn't really, but he didn't interject.

"When Lucia was young, she was like anyone—she wanted kindness. Boys were kind to her, but not for the right reasons. She has a history of being used, and over time, her heart crystallized. By her early teens, she was like she is now, and already directing more and more of her attention on business. Lucia likes money. She likes that it can be counted, and counted upon."

Kakashi wanted to know more about Lucia's ambitions, but he didn't want to draw the conversation away from Lucia as a person just yet. "Did she ever want love?"

"She never got the chance to ask that question, I don't think. She was married off at sixteen. And Gehard only married Lucia because she came with a fat paycheck."

"Did she not have a choice?"

"She had a choice. When father died, mother told Lucia she could choose a husband from a handful of eligible men. If she refused, the family would lose the inheritance. Lucia didn't really choose to be married. But she did choose the inheritance."

"So she sacrificed. Couldn't you secure the line?" Kakashi asked.

"I was married already, and not to the right family. I am also unable to have children—five miscarriages. I didn't want the inheritance anyway. It's a filthy business. Blood money. I'm sure you've heard the stories. But Lucia wouldn't give it up. She wanted it. She wanted it more than anything."

"Even though it's filthy?"

"Yes."

"And having children was part of what was necessary to get it?"

"It was."

Kakashi reflected quietly about this. Lucia had children to secure money, but she did love them. Anyone could see that. Still, money was clearly important to her.

"Why Itachi Uchiha?" he mused aloud. "If it was just about money, wouldn't anyone have done?"

"As far as her ambition is concerned, I think it could have been almost anyone," Cecile answered. "Though Lucia being Lucia she would have sought out the best she could find."

"Wasn't it dangerous to name the child after the father?"

"Of course," Cecile said. Her expression was so bland, Kakashi had the impression she was exasperated with him. "But Lucia is a very good liar, especially to herself."

Kakashi was intrigued. "What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Kakashi didn't reply.

Cecile sighed. "I have watched over Lucia all my life. She is my baby sister. I can tell you. When she was with her first child, the change in her was extraordinary. I never saw such warmth and devotion in a woman who had otherwise become so closed off."

"No one doubts she loves the children-" Kakashi began, and then paused.

Cecile was looking at him so intently.

"Wait a minute," he said, interrupting himself with a flash of insight. "You think Itachi Uchiha was someone she-?" The implications were preposterous. "You think she fell in love? Unintentionally?"

"I wasn't there. I can only tell you that she talked about him a great deal for only having met him once, and in great dilemma, questioning herself all the time, the way women do when they've lost their heads to their feelings. Lucia doesn't have any female friends, so I wouldn't be surprised if she had no idea how she sounded."

"What did she say exactly?"

"She rehashed every little thing observed about him and all it might mean, or not mean, and all she did and all she felt, and what *her* reactions might mean, and so on. On and on. For a year. She only met that man once. Then she named her child after him. I couldn't believe she took such a risk. And then, out of the blue, she went *back* to that place. When she did that, I thought to myself 'I'll never see her again. She'll give it all up and just stay wherever she's at. Maybe she'll come back for the baby.' But I was wrong. She came back. And she stayed."

Kakashi leaned back. "Itachi Uchiha died. He was killed in battle, though he would have been dying already, from illness, when Lucia last saw him."

Cecile set down her teacup. "That's what I gathered from what she told me. When she came back, she was… strange for awhile. She told me it was because she was pregnant again, but I always thought there was more to it."

"The second time, didn't she go to the Land of Fire on business?"

"She has business there, but I doubt she really had to go in person to see to it. Most of what Lucia does can be done via correspondence."

Kakashi was surprised. "So the second time, you think she went for Itachi Uchiha?"

"I do. Maybe she doesn't think so. Maybe she even wanted to disprove what she felt—that would be like her. All I can tell you that she didn't need another baby. Yet she did nothing to prevent it, which would have been easy to do."

"Did she fear Gehard's reaction?"

"Not enough." Cecile took another sip of tea. "Don't let what she says about him fool you. Lucia has never been scared of Gehard."

"She doesn't strike me as easily frightened."

Cecile paused, as if she had to think about it. "There was a time when she was. There was a time when we both feared for our lives."

"I heard a rumor," Kakashi said, "that her father was murdered."

"One of the other high houses hired it done."

"Why was he killed?"

"The same reason anyone is killed. Because of money."

"The family fortune? The one Lucia inherited when she secured the line?"

"The High Houses are all connected, and the other families had plans and investments tied up with that money. Father must have upset someone by something he did with it. Someone acted. Maybe in rage, maybe in calculation—I don't know. Lucia and I were sleeping in the house the night it happened."

"What about your mother? Lucia told us she committed suicide."

"Suicide? That was how it was ruled, but if Lucia told you that, she lied to you. At least, it isn't quite the truth. I suppose we'll never know

for sure."

"What happened?"

"After father was killed, mother lived just long enough to see Lucia married."

"Then what?"

"She was harassed. I don't know by who, but I suspect they wanted her to confess what father had done with the money, and why, but I don't think mother knew. She was discovered dead. She drank ammonia. It was ruled a suicide, but who would choose to die that way? Her insides were torn up. It must have been agony."

Kakashi felt cold. "You think she was tortured to death."

"I know she was tortured. Lucia and I both heard her screaming that night. In the library. All night. We couldn't get in the door. And we were afraid to. Whether they killed her by forcing her to drink ammonia or she killed herself with what she had on hand to avoid saying something, I don't know. By morning, she was dead."

Cecile's face was reserved, her emotion trapped somewhere deep inside, but the remnants of sorrow and horror were evident around her eyes. Kakashi tried to imagine what that night must have been like, for Cecile and Lucia as well as their mother. "She's was civilian," he said. "A housewife. Why wasn't anyone prosecuted? You were witnesses. Why didn't anyone believe you?"

Cecile took a deep breath. "I keep forgetting that you don't live here. You don't understand how it is. It doesn't matter what people believe. Money shields perpetrators from the law and it shields everyone else from having to think about it."

"Even murder?"

"It happens. It has happened within the Van Alstyne family."

"The bodies under the floors?"

Cecile nodded. There was no regret in her posture. Those deaths were disconnected from her, something that had happened a long time ago, and far beyond her control. "That's right. Those old bones. Evidence that our family is not exempt. Like the other high houses, the Van Alstynes are more powerful than the law."

"So whoever did this is still around? And you just… live with it?"

She shrugged. "What else is there to do? I can guarantee you that the people responsible for the death of our parents, whoever they are, have come to luncheons and dinners in our home, have greeted us with smiles, complimented us, gone on outings, co-hosted charity events. If you think my sister is cold, if you think she has little trust, then you are right. "

"But what is she trying to do?"

"I don't know. She talks to me about everything *except* business. I think that is the only reason she trusts me at all. I can tell you what she has done, though. The reason they all hate her, I mean."

"Ruining the fortunes of others?"

By Cecile's expression, the woman was unsurprised that he had heard this rumor. She sipped her tea and averted her eyes, staring at the paintings on the walls—paintings of fields, wagons sitting in the grass, and farm houses. "It started when she returned from your country the second time. Something must have gone her way because when she got back, she went *after* people—after their money, I mean. Not the higher houses—they are too powerful—but she's ruined some of the lesser families; driven them to bankruptcy or forced them into positions of subservience by debt. These were her neighbors, her classmates, people she grew up with. She destroyed them. And profited." She looked back at Kakashi, her dark eyes sharp. "My sister brought the Van Alstyne name to a new level of infamy. She did it legally."

"These lesser families," Kakashi queried, "she has no grudge against them?"

"Not that I know of, unless it is for being sycophants to the high houses. People say she just wanted the money. It might be true. Winning always made Lucia feel better."

"Why at that time?" Kakashi demanded. He leaned forward. "And what does Konoha have to do with it?"

The wheels in Kakashi's head were turning. The connection might be direct. Shinobi may have been hired to kill Lucia's father and torture her mother to death. It was doubtful that these rich folk would do it themselves. Maybe Lucia was acting out of revenge. Maybe her 'business' in the Land of Fire was an investigation. Had she discovered Konoha was to blame, or was another village responsible? And what did she intend to do?

"I don't know," Cecile answered, "but I would be surprised if there was no connection. Like I said, it was when she came back from your country that I noticed a change. Gehard didn't notice, of course. All he ever saw in Lucia was how rich she made him. But I saw it. It was almost like…" She paused.

"What?" he asked. "What was the change?"

Cecile looked thoughtful. "She was resolute. And she had lost her fear."

Kakashi was struck by sudden understanding.

Itachi felt there was something strange about Amaya, something off, but he wasn't sure what.

When he said she could come in, she didn't come around the front. Instead, she scaled the wall to his bedroom, grasping at handholds and footholds he hadn't even known were there, using chakra to

keep her feet from slipping. He stood back from the windowsill and let her clamber through.

She swung her legs over. She wasn't even breathing hard.

He couldn't stop staring at her. She didn't look like the Amaya he knew. This was like a prettier, softer, more adult version of Amaya, one dressed in civilian clothes; her limbs were bare from wrist to shoulder and ankle to thigh. But then she hopped off the windowsill. She stood like the Amaya he knew—confident, a little aloof, and sure of her abilities.

She looked right at him, turning so that her eyes pierced his from over her right shoulder. "I thought you were training with Sasuke."

"We broke early," Itachi replied. He found it difficult to talk. "How did you know I was home?"

"I saw your light on."

There was a pause while they looked at each other.

"I don't want to train," she added.

He swallowed. He was tired, so that was welcome news, if a little unusual. Amaya always wanted to train. "So… you want to hang out then?" The question wasn't really necessary. The answer was obvious.

She smiled. "Yeah."

She began walking around his room. He followed her with his eyes. Without her ninja gear, she looked like one of the girls who had attended his old school, one of the confident, popular girls, the ones that always seemed more in control, a little more savvy than the rest. But seeing her in a tank top and shirt skirt made him think strange things, like whether her skin was as soft as it looked and if she had ever kissed anyone before.

Those thoughts made him uncomfortable. He knew he liked Amaya, but she was a teammate. When he thought of her, he usually thought about how to avoid getting his ass kicked, and how he might impress her so that some day, when he was older, he could tell her he liked her.

But she was here, now, in his room, and his mind scrambled to catch up. Maybe he should ask if she would like to walk somewhere? There was nothing of interest in his room. Itachi didn't own much anymore, so there wasn't anything to show her. He thought longingly of his guitar.

"Are you home alone?" she asked him. When he just stared at her, she added: "I mean that it's so quiet."

"Y…yeah," he said. "My mom's at the school with Rina."

Amaya sat on the foot of his bed and kicked off her shoes.

Itachi's heart hammered. This was stupid. Really stupid. But he told himself there was no reason to panic. She just wanted to sit down. Probably. There wasn't anywhere else to sit. Still, his palms felt sweaty.

Amaya looked up at him, brown eyes soft under long lashes. She scooted to one side of the bed and smiled companionably.

The shimmering on the inside of Itachi's head, the sensation he had felt since training with Sasuke, ballooned. All at once, everything he looked at seemed bright. He couldn't think.

Was she wearing lip gloss?

He sat down on the bed beside her. She smiled and turned toward him. Their knees touched. She didn't seem to notice, but Itachi felt like that part of his leg had caught fire and was burning a hole through skin and muscle all the way to the bone.

There was a lump in his throat the size of a rabbit.

Beside him, Amaya sighed, shoulders slumping. "Is Sasuke any nicer to you?" she asked, as if this was normal, like they sat so close together and talked all the time.

"I don't know," he said, surprised that he was capable of forming words with all that was churning in his head. "Some days he seems to like training me. Other times, he seems to hate to look at me. I don't know what he thinks."

She was silent for a moment. Her hands were clenched around the edge of his mattress. Her knuckles were almost white.

"Amaya?" he asked.

"My father is going on a mission."

Itachi was quiet. He knew Amaya's father was an elite Jounin but had never met the man. He seemed to be out on missions a lot. At least, Amaya was home alone a lot. What was different about this time?

"He might miss the match," she said. "And I know that's not his fault. It's just— I was hoping to show him..." She stammered and fell silent.

"You're great," Itachi said awkwardly. "I mean, you're one of the best in the year, right? I'm sure he's proud of you. Your jutsu is spectacular. Even if he's not there to see it, everyone will say so."

She didn't say anything. She just stared straight ahead.

Itachi didn't say anything either. He wondered if he should make some kind of an analogy—maybe to his inability to please Sasuke, or to his mother's expectations, which were extreme in their own way, but the right words wouldn't come to his tongue.

"Itachi," she whispered after a moment. "Why do you want to be a Shinobi?"

"To protect my mother and sister," he said automatically. "And because of my father, I guess. And Sasuke. I think I belong here. It just feels right." Amaya didn't respond. After a moment, Itachi returned the question. "Why do you want to be a Shinobi?"

To his surprise, tears welled up in Amaya's eyes. Itachi was startled. He had rarely seen Amaya out of temper. He had never seen her cry.

"I don't know," she said, and her voice wobbled as if the words were being shaken out of her. "I knew yesterday. I can't remember now. I'm just… I'm just so…"

The final words didn't come.

Itachi didn't know what to do, but he didn't need her to finish her sentence to understand. He could feel loneliness emanating from her, a bleak hopelessness that felt somehow familiar. His attraction to it was magnetic. He instantly wanted to fix it. He didn't want her to suffer. He wanted to help her. But he didn't know what to do or say. He thought about putting his arm around her, but his hand merely twitched.

"It's okay," he said at last, not sure if it was the right thing to say, but feeling like he had to say something. "You can cry. I don't mind."

Amaya's whole body tensed, almost like she was fighting with herself. Almost immediately, the tears stopped. She stared at nothing for over a minute, looking furious with herself. After awhile, she finally looked at him, brown eyes melting with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's okay," he replied. He felt mesmerized by her sadness. "Don't worry about it."

Her gaze drifted down to the floor beneath her feet. "I'm supposed to be strong," she said. "I'm trained to fight, and to kill, and—" She closed her eyes. "Why am I upset? I should be more grown up. My

father not coming to my match because he has a mission is a childish thing to cry about."

"It's okay to get upset," he said. "Even Shinobi can be upset. I get upset at my mom."

She looked at him then, a spark of interest bringing light into her eyes. "You do?"

"All the time. She has a lot of problems. She thinks I don't know. Or she pretends I don't notice or something."

"What kind of problems?" Amaya asked.

"You've probably heard the rumors."

Amaya was quiet. "I heard some things," she admitted. "My father says we shouldn't trust her."

Itachi shrugged. "There's always been rumors about her," he said, "since before I can remember. I used to get in fights at school about it, trying to protect her honor. But then I discovered the rumors were true, or part way true, and I would get in fights—I don't know—just because, I guess. I was mad at her."

"The Grass says she is dangerous to Konoha. Do you think it's true?"

Itachi hesitated.

It struck him as a strange question. Why was Amaya asking him about his mother? He didn't see how the answer would help her, unless she wanted the information just because her father was suspicious.

It didn't matter. Itachi remembered the first rule of the family. "I don't know," he replied. "I can't think of her as anything except my mom. She does scare me, though."

"You don't think she would hurt you, do you?"

"No. She loves me."

"Then why does she scare you?"

Itachi gave Amaya a sidelong look. "Trust me. If she was your mother, she would scare you too."

"I'm not scared of anyone," Amaya replied haughtily. "Not even my father."

Itachi thought that was a strange response.

Amaya's father was probably pretty terrifying, given that he was an elite Shinobi, but that wasn't the kind of fear that Itachi meant. Itachi wasn't afraid of his mother because she had the ability to fight or kill. It was her love that frightened him. She loved him so much, and her expectations for him were so severe, that her mere displeasure loomed large in his mind. He never wanted to put a foot wrong with her. He knew she would come down on him if he did.

As he was thinking about these things, he realized suddenly that he couldn't see parts of Amaya's face. He blinked, but it didn't help. There were floaters in his eyes, like he had looked quickly at the sun and then looked away. Black dots seemed to swallow chunks of his vision. He blinked again. He shook his head. They didn't go away.

"Do my eyes look okay to you?" he asked Amaya.

"Huh?" She blinked out of her reverie and turned toward him, peering into his face. "Yeah, they look fine. You didn't injure them, did you?"

"No. I-"

He cut off abruptly, floaters forgotten. She was hovering close, staring at him. Around the floaters, he could still tears in the corner of her eyes, sparkling on the tops of her lower eyelashes like dew, but

the sadness was gone from her expression. Something else was there—a sort of breathy brazenness that tied his stomach into a knot.

"Itachi," Amaya whispered, barely audible in the inches between them. "Will you kiss me?"

His brain stopped functioning. "What?"

Her cheeks flushed. She pulled back . "I'm sorry. Don't you like me?"

How did she know he liked her? The question did a lap around his consciousness and then dissipated into nothingness. He couldn't think. He blush had deepened. She was thinking she had got it wrong and had said something terrible, and any second she was going to apologize, and then—

He leaned in before that train of thought could reach a destination.

He heard Amaya's breath catch, but she didn't stiffen or pull away. She stayed perfectly still, allowing him to close the space. He had never kissed anyone before. He tried not to over think it. Just touch her lips with his lips, and pull back without hurting himself, or her, and that would be enough.

He made contact. Her lips were soft, but kissing them didn't feel quite like he expected. He wasn't sure what he expected, but it wasn't to feel so much at once. Up close, she smelled like strawberries. That was probably her lip gloss, he realized, which was a little sticky, but he stopped thinking about that when her lips parted. He stopped thinking at all. He barely had the presence of mind to realize his eyes were open, and shut them, because he thought that was what he was supposed to do.

He pulled back sharply.

Her eyes were open. "Are you okay?"

He just stared at her. "Huh—"

She was sitting very close to him, so close that they were touching. Her breasts were heaving in her shirt. He tried not to think about that. His eyes skittered away from her, looking at anything except her, and then bounced back. He didn't remember her being so close.

"Itachi?" she whispered. She leaned forward.

"Yeah," he stammered. "Great."

A smile broke across her face. She leaned forward. He realized with a start that she wanted to kiss again, and that if he didn't, she would. It happened so fast. All he saw were her eyes, framed by lashes, inches from his face, consuming the whole of his vision. And then Amaya's lips pressed against his. He could barely feel them.

But he was soaring.

I can die , he thought. *I can die right now and it would be fine.*

Except that he wanted to stick around long enough to see what happened next.

Next. He re-imagined all his fantasies at once, weeks or months or years compiled in a second, when he and Amaya spent more and more of their afternoons together. He would take her out and they would go on walks or picnics or whatever. Next.

Then he realized, with a confusing mix of thrill and horror, that 'next' seemed to be happening *right now* .

She had risen up on her knees. Her hands were on his shoulders.

He had a vague, desperate thought, cluttered by sensation.

If he touched her, he felt sure there would be some sort of a collapse. So he kept his arms stiff at his sides, both hands flat on the

mattress. He tried to think, but he could feel her breath on his cheek and thought eluded him. This tough girl…

His head was starting to hurt.

She kissed him again. And he tasted salt.

He opened his eyes slowly.

Everything in the room looked so bright he could barely see the girl in front of him.

But he saw that there were tears in her eyes. "Why won't you hold me?"

"I don't know," he said truthfully.

Answers flew past him: Because he was scared. Because his head hurt. Because she was his teammate. Because she was crying. Because his mother might be home any second. Because his focus should be on the match. Because it was wrong. He struggled to voice an objection that made sense, but he just couldn't think.

"I think it's crazy!" she said, and somehow he knew she wasn't talking about him. "Don't you think it's crazy? It's crazy. I can fight. I take hits without a cry. I even know how to kill someone. But I don't know what… I mean…"

He didn't know what she was talking about, but she was clearly upset; his response was instinct. He wrapped his arms around Amaya and pulled her body against him. She fell into his lap. He pulled her into a hug.

She was small and soft—all curves and lightness. He had never held a girl before. He found that he quite liked it, but he also didn't. Confusion bubbled up from everywhere. There was pain in his head, not a pounding throb, but a steadily growing tension like a high pitch whine. He still couldn't see clearly.

Amaya leaned back. He tried to make out her expression. He found her lips parted, her face flushed, her eyes luminous, and her expression set. She didn't look confused at all. In fact, the determination in her eye quite unnerved him. It was the look she got before a fight, like she wanted to prove something, not to him, but to someone or something, and he found himself without words, action, or thought to resist. She kissed him again.

He closed his eyes, head spinning.

"Itachi," Amaya whispered.

He slowly pried his eyes open. Amaya was staring at him. Again, he had the impression that something was not quite right.

To his terror, she grasped the bottom of her shirt. "I'm hot."

Oh shit…

Lucia walked briskly, moving at a fair clip so that Rina almost had to run to keep up. Her daughter trailed a pace or two behind anyway, eyebrows pinched and lower lip stuck out in a pout.

Back in the classroom, Rina had admitted to failing on purpose, but she refused to say why. Lucia had noted with a modicum of displeasure that Rina had learned something about the power of silence, probably from observing her mother. No matter what question she or Tenten asked, or how kindly, Rina just kept repeating that she would do better.

Lucia was not to be bested by her own tricks. She acknowledged Rina's promise to improve, but terminated her privilege to watch Itachi train. She explained to her daughter that accompanying Itachi was a privilege. She could earn it back when she not only proved her capability in her studies, but explained why she had chosen to fail.

Rina had not taken it well. She had stiffened in her seat with every word, eyes wide and watery, and then exploded in a fit. Most of the time, Rina was a quiet, exemplary girl, so the storm had shocked Tenten. Rina wailed. She screamed. She kicked and hammered on the desk. Lucia was not so surprised. Tantrums were a rare occurrence, but she had weathered several of them. She remained impassive, arms crossed, and waited until Rina stopped screaming before calmly repeating her resolution. Tears drying on her cheeks, Rina subsided into a sulk.

The walk home was a quiet one. Lucia was not concerned. Rina's sulks followed a pattern. They began stony, became reflective, would slowly segue to embarrassment, and finally to apology. Until Rina came around, Lucia had nothing further to say.

The shadows had started to lengthen by the time they reached the house. Lucia noted that Itachi was home by the light from his room. That was strange. He had been training until past dusk every day of late.

She opened the front door and allowed Rina in first. Her daughter said nothing. Rather than running up to her room she hovered in the kitchen, shifting her weight from foot to foot and looking at everything except her mother.

"Are you hungry?" Lucia asked her.

Rina nodded silently, but otherwise did not respond.

Lucia prepared something for Rina to eat and leaned against the counter while Rina picked at her food.

Something bothered her. It wasn't Rina. The quiet in the house was oppressive.

Was Itachi asleep?

She wasn't sure how to attribute the stab of alarm that followed this thought. He wasn't asleep. Something told her he was awake. There was a feeling in the air. Tension. It was almost like… panic.

Obeying intuition, she left Rina at the table and hurried up the stairs.

She did not knock. She did not call out. She flung open the door.

The world seemed to stop. And then it rushed forward so fast, it spun. Lucia's mind had to leap into triple speed to process what she saw.

She recognized the girl immediately. Amaya. One of Itachi's teammates.

She was sitting on the bed with her son. Not just sitting. She was half in his lap, and half undressed, a shirt wadded up the mattress beside her and shoes on the floor. She couldn't be much older than her son, barely more than a child, but Amaya's body was that of a woman, full breasts barely contained by a thin white sport bra, her skin clean and unmarred, aglow with freshness of youth.

Itachi's face was a sight. In another situation, or at another time, Lucia might have found his deep flush humorous, his shock and fear comical. But it brought her no mirth now.

The door hit the wall with a bang. Both children started, heads swiveling in her direction.

"Nothing happened!" Itachi gasped.

Lucia skewered him with her eyes. He shrank against the headboard of the bed.

Amaya reacted quite differently. She leapt off the mattress and turned on Lucia with eyes fierce and abrasive, like those of an animal. Unlike Itachi, shame was absent from her face. She seemed geared to fight, as if challenging Lucia for the higher ground.

A lost battle if Lucia had ever seen one.

The girl might have wanted to look like a tiger, but Lucia was reminded of nothing so much as a hedgehog, shaking not with rage but with mind-melting fear that it should be discovered delicate once overturned. It wasn't difficult to understand. Lucia had once been a twelve year old girl. She had never imagined being on the other side. She knew exactly what to say.

She didn't raise her voice at all. "Go downstairs, right now, and sit at the table."

"You can't do anything to me!" Amaya shouted. The words tore from her throat with such ferocity they came out grainy and rough. "You can't make me do anything! I am a Shinobi! I can kill you!"

Itachi gaped at Amaya as if she were a lunatic.

"This is my home," Lucia replied, still in the same even tone. "You will not speak so to me again. Do as I have said. Do anything else, and I shall go directly to your home. I will have my word. Do you understand? Either with you in my kitchen or with whoever resides where you live."

Amaya turned white as a sheet.

"It is your choice," Lucia said. "Make it now."

Trembling, Amaya picked up her tank top from the bed, slipped on her shoes, and brushed passed by Lucia and out of the room. She didn't look back at Itachi. She didn't meet Lucia's eyes. She could be heard running down the stairs. Lucia did not turn around to see where she had gone or whether she had stayed. She would find out soon enough.

Her eyes locked onto her son. "That girl," she said, "was your teammate." She did not hide an emphasis on 'was.'

Itachi visibly trembled. She studied his face carefully. He looked thoroughly miserable, and terrified, but there was more than that.

"Why are you squinting?" she demanded. "Answer me."

"It's bright."

"Bright?"

"Isn't it? I can't see. I've got floaters. My head really hurts."

A migraine? Lucia used to get them in her adolescence. So did her mother. Migraine headaches could be triggered by stress, and Itachi was certainly dealing with plenty of it. It wasn't unlikely for Itachi to have inherited that from her, but she didn't overlook the significance of his father's genes. She sighed. Whatever the problem, it was just as well. She wasn't prepared to have a conversation with him now, and couldn't if his head was splitting. They would talk later. Like Rina, her son, so careful and deliberate, would be best approached after he had time to think.

"Lay down in the dark," she said. "The pain will get worse before it gets better. There's nothing you can do about it."

"Mom," he said, and she knew he wasn't thinking about his head or his eyes. The remorse in his voice was so thick it was palpable. "I just—"

"Not now," she said, and turned. With one hand on the door frame, she paused.

Rina stood in the hallway, shrunk against the far wall in the shadows, head craned to peek into Itachi's room, her eyes wide and worried. Lucia wondered how much she understood. She must have seen Amaya run down the stairs. She would have heard the shouting. She was close enough to have heard Itachi complaining about his eyes.

"It will be all right," Lucia said within both her children's hearing. She nodded to Rina's bedroom.

Without speaking, Rina scurried into her room and pulled the door closed.

"What happened at Rina's school?" Itachi asked from behind her.

She turned to look at him from over her shoulder. "Rina can no longer go to your training," Lucia replied. "She is failing her classes."

"What?" Itachi gasped. "How?"

"By choice. She is failing on purpose."

Incredulity flickered across Itachi's face.

Without further conversation, Lucia let herself out and quietly shut the door.

Darkness enveloped her. The sun had set outside and shadows engulfed the hallway. Lucia stood alone in the blackness for a few moments, processing her thoughts. When she felt confident about what she wanted to say, she made her way back down the stairs.

Amaya sat at the table. Her shoulders slumped forward, her face screwed into an expression that looked painful. She jerked in her seat when Lucia walked into the tiny kitchen, head whipping around to watch Lucia's entry, bracing herself, it seemed, for a blow.

Lucia ignored her. She was conscious of the girl's round brown eyes following her as she set a kettle on the stove, lit the flame, and placed two teacups on the countertop.

The silence stretched. Amaya looked away.

As the minutes passed, Amaya sank into herself more and more and began to fidget with her clothes. She avoided looking at Lucia now. It was as if by mere refusal to acknowledge her presence, she could

actually make Lucia disappear. When the water neared boiling, Lucia steeped the tea leaves and then poured equal amounts into the two ceramic cups. She carried both cups to the table, set one in front of Amaya, and sat down across from her with the other.

Lucia cross her legs and took an unhurried sip. The water was scalding, just the way she liked it.

Amaya didn't touch her cup.

It was interesting how familiar this felt, and yet strange too… She had not expected to ever be on this side of the table.

"Sitting there is not enough," Lucia said. "Have you nothing to say to me? If you will not talk, I will have to speak to your mother. What is her name?"

Amaya remained silent. She stared at the table, hands clenched.

"Can you hear me?"

Silence.

Lucia took another sip of tea.

"My mother is dead."

Lucia did not react outwardly. Inwardly, she felt pity. That might explain a few things. "And your father?"

The girl looked away. Her hands trembled on the table. "Please don't bother him."

"Why not?"

"He's busy."

"Doing what?"

"Being a Shinobi!" Amaya shouted, head whipping around to Lucia, pride bursting out of her in all directions.

Lucia said nothing. Privately, she thought he was not, apparently, busy being a father.

Maybe Amaya had the same thought, because all at once, she started to cry. Tears just gushed from her eyes. She looked horrified with herself, and then angry at Lucia, as if Lucia had caused it. But neither horror nor anger was enough for her to stop. She doubled over across the table, as if by making herself smaller she could contain it, but her chest only heaved with greater effort. She gasped for air, but with that breath only sobbed harder.

Lucia let her cry, politely averting her eyes and not speaking until the worst of it was out. Amaya lay limp, her face pressed to the wood. Slowly, she sat up, scrubbing tears from her cheeks. She looked ashamed. She did not look at Lucia.

"I apologize," she said. "You are right. I should not be in your home without your knowledge. And I…" She took a deep breath. "I shouldn't have … been with Itachi. If you don't approve-"

"I don't have an objection to Itachi having a girlfriend," Lucia interrupted. Amaya looked startled. "Not within reason, but not in secret, and not with the pressure he is under now. If I may be frank," she added, "my son deserves better."

Amaya's mouth parted slightly. In anger.

"Don't you think?" Lucia asked.

Amaya closed her mouth. Lucia could see the message sinking in.

Lucia felt she understood what had happened. Her own experience was informative, but more than that, she knew her son. If the events of this evening was an accident, or a naturally budding development, she would have seen it coming. This was planned, however rashly,

by Amaya. It was not something Itachi had initiated, though he might not have dealt with it in the best manner. She would deal with that later. How Amaya responded would tell her whether she was right.

"What you did was stupid," Lucia said. "Not only because you are too young, but you are too *old* to behave so foolishly. Do you not realize the stress you have put on my child? On your whole team?"

Amaya blanched. "The match," she whispered, as if she really hadn't thought of it. That was interesting. In a way, it made Lucia feel better.

But she wasn't done. "Did you think of anyone but yourself? Do you know what kind of pressure Itachi is under? How much do you think he can handle? What about that other boy? I have seen the way he looks at you, the way he treats you. Haro, right? You are friends. But he loves you. Anyone can see it. Why did you not run to him?"

"Don't—" Amaya begged. "Please."

"I'll tell you why," Lucia said. "You knew the impulse was reckless. You didn't want to screw things up with the one you really love. So you preyed on my son. It was a deliberate choice. You knew it would be easy. You knew he likes you."

Amaya didn't answer, and it was because of this lack of a defense in one so proud that Lucia knew she had it right…at least partially right.

"Did you hope for anything else?" Lucia asked. "Did you think to pry information out of Itachi about me? Did you think that would please your father? I know I am a curiosity to the Jounin. If that was your intent, you would have done better just to have asked me."

"I didn't!" she said, her eyes wide. "It crossed my mind, but I didn't really. I wasn't thinking. I just— I'm sorry. Please. What you are going to do?"

Lucia sighed. "Drink your tea. It will help."

Amaya appeared baffled by this response.

"It is not my intention to injure you," Lucia explained. She paused, allowing that to sink in. "I do not think you are totally to blame. But I want you to understand exactly how I feel about it."

Amaya didn't answer, but she dropped her eyes.

"When I was not much older than you," Lucia said. "I made some poor decisions. I do not want you to suffer from the same mistakes I made. I especially do not want you to make these mistakes with my son. He cannot afford any mistakes. Do you understand me?"

Amaya stared at Lucia. Slowly, she lifted her tea cup. She took a sip.

"I do not wish to punish you," Lucia added, "but I am concerned. I think I must have a word with your father."

Amaya slammed the teacup down. "Don't! Please! Don't tell him about this. I will do anything you ask of me!" Tears filled her eyes. "Please," she begged. "Anything!"

Lucia felt pity for the girl, but not enough to change her mind. Something had driven this girl to her son's bedroom, had driven her to recklessly act on impulses beyond her years, and to do so when there was much she cared about at stake. That had to be addressed.

But before she could say anything more on the matter, a knock sounded at the door.

"Lucia Van Alstyne?"

It was Ino's voice.

She blinked in surprise. How many surprises could one day hold?

"Come in," she called.

Ino pushed open the door and stuck her head into the room. Her eyes darted to Amaya with some confusion, but they came back to Lucia quickly. "Uh, sorry to bother you. The Hokage wants to see you."

"Right now?" Lucia asked.

Ino made a face. "That's what I was told."

Lucia looked at Amaya. The girl looked away, biting her lip, anxiety plain on her face. "Go home," she said to the girl. "Think on what I have said."

"Can I see Itachi?" Amaya mumbled. She squeezed her eyes shut. "Will you let…? Can we still train together?"

"Not tonight."

Amaya got up from the table. Without another word, she brushed past Ino and disappeared out the door.

"What was that about?" Ino asked.

"Nothing," Lucia said. "Adolescence." She frowned. "I don't suppose the Hokage explained the intention behind this summons?"

Ino just shrugged.

Lucia nodded. "I see. Let me just tell my children that I am going out."

Naruto was actually feeling a little nervous when Lucia was admitted into the Hokage's office, though he didn't show it, not anymore than Ibiki, who stood like a rock by the Hokage's desk, arms crossed. Sakura had refused to leave, so when Lucia entered, shutting the door behind her, she faced three Shinobi, one of them a well known interrogator with a face covered in scars.

She looked surprised. "What's going on?" she asked. "I've had a trying day."

"I apologize for the inconvenience," Naruto said. "Something has been weighing on my mind. I want to move things forward. There's something I would like to ask you."

Lucia didn't react, but her eyes flickered to Ibiki, whom she had never met.

"This is Ibiki, Konoha's head of interrogation," Naruto told her.

There were several seconds of silence. "You want to interrogate me?" she asked.

She did not sound frightened. She seemed almost…resigned. Naruto wasn't sure how to interpret that, but he didn't like it.

"No," he said. "Not exactly. I mean, I want him to ask you some questions, yes, but it's not an interrogation. You don't have to answer."

Now she looked curious. "Then why an interrogator? We talk already. Ask."

"Well, there's a matter of expertise associated with the subject," Naruto said. "I'm not the most qualified. This might be a bit awkward, but I think it is important. I want you to tell Ibiki about Itachi Uchiha. Specifically, I want you to explain what he did to you. As a sadist. In detail."

"Pardon?"

To his left, Naruto saw Sakura close her eyes and mutter under her breath. He caught the words 'mistake' and 'atrocious' and 'Sasuke will really hate this.'

"The details might be...difficult," Naruto said. "I'm sure they are personal. Ibiki has experience with this, so you can talk to Ibiki alone

if you like. You have my word you won't be forced to divulge information. I just want Ibiki's opinion, as a professional torturer, on what Itachi Uchiha did to you… as a torturer. And lover. Or both."

Lucia had become a statue. "I see."

"I wouldn't ask," Naruto said, "but I really think it might be important."

He could see skepticism on her face. She thought he had an angle. And she wasn't pleased about it. He hoped he wasn't making a mistake. He thought he had been making some headway with her in the past couple of weeks. He didn't want to break the little amount of trust she had in his judgment.

But her answer came easily. "All right," she said. "I don't know what you expect to learn, but I will tell you everything I can remember, if you really want to know."

"Thank you," Naruto said.

"Does it have to be tonight?" she asked. "It has been a really long day."

"No," Naruto said. "It can wait, but not too long. I would like to have Ibiki's report before Itachi's match if possible. So you'll have at least a few days to think about it. I know it was a long time ago. Try to remember whatever you can."

Naruto thought he saw a new expression on Lucia's face. It was sad, but not quite sad.

Whatever it was didn't stop her from responding. "Very well," she said.

When she spoke, Naruto thought he identified the emotion. Regret.

He dismissed her without further conversation, but it made him wonder. What did Lucia regret?

TBC

The Itachi vs. Yukio match should be coming up relatively soon, either next chapter or the one after it. Also, more SasuSaku. Please review this chapter. I always ask because asking is better than not asking, but I am in particular need of distraction right now. The more response I get about the story, the more I will feel like writing it, and I really would like to be writing, as opposed to staring at walls thinking about a certain someone whose happiness is important to me, and who can be happiest right now by being left alone.

Things you can review that I would heartily appreciate:

-Naruto's interrogation plan

-What was revealed of Lucia's back story

-Amaya

-Lucia's intention to talk to Sachio (Amaya's father)

-Any speculative thoughts you have about plot or other characters

Thank yous go out to:

geckohawaii (soooo please to see you reviewing every chapter and enjoying the story), Platerair Queen (wonderful review! And esp appreciated this summer. Itachi's bonds with his team will recover from the hole I wrote them into this chapter…), dynamicROAR (impressed is a big compliment!), Kondou (thank you so much! Sorry for the delay), bluetopaz93 (wonderful to hear from you and amazing review!), Sal (you got your wish!), ambergur-pyon96 (glad you like my OCs!), dark,angel.261 (amazing you stayed up so late! Thank you), Adel-chan (wonderful to have you back! Great review), Rin-Elwin (great to hear from you again!, Friska (I love SasuSaku too), jazz (more development to come!), elle (sorry…sasuke was out this chapter but he'll be back next chapter for sure), Helena (there will be

some more plot twists. That's all I can say), QueenTania (love your review! Thank you very much!), bibsa1 (they should probably call her Sakura-sensei…oh well), Joy-girl (your comments about Rina will be very applicable in the future), Jeshii-san (thank you for being patient!), AnimePrincessAkina (thank you!), suddon (I hope you continue to think so!), Valentir (I remember your reviews as Ruby Rita! I'm glad you came around to the preggers plotline as well as loving Naruto. Thank you!), PerfidiousPink (still love that name), La Nuit Noir (thanks!), Theodosia (thank you! I hope you enjoyed it), annieepz (I love your review! And no SasuLucia…I promise), Mizuiro Neko (thank you! Sorry for the wait), Mash Tactics, Dionysos, LittleGreenWolf (thanks for staying up all night! Hope you read this chapter), Blade Redwind (love your review! Speculation always tickles me), nodaaaaaa (sorry for the cliffy!), shvesta (glad you liked the suspense!), Crimson Marionette (always a pleasure to see you review!), Demon Cello Lilin, Kaku-Chan (sorry to kill you with suspense!), -00-night-eyes-00, insaneteacup (LOVE YOU), minniemousemom, (glad you liked Amaya last chapter! Wonder what you think of her this chapter…), hymnia (your review is amazing. I am speechless), IVIdaedhos (lovely to hear fromyou as always!), Delbi18 (thank you! I'm glad. Hope it keeps getting better), sunshinestar16, Derrand59 (it's not on hiatus! Thank you so much), shkh4ever (thank you! I believe already replied to your questions).

Chapter 15

I've had most of this chapter done for a long long time, but just had so much trouble with it. It's long and I still had to cut a good 10 pages out that will be in the next chapter (so I guess that one is almost half done…?).

Reviews last chapter were wonderful!

One note: Amaya did not use a genjutsu on Itachi. Upon rereading the scene, I can see how it would seem like I was implying that.

WARNINGS: adult situations, specifically sadomasochism

White Rain

Chapter 15

By Zapenstap

Sasuke had spent the evening and most of the morning making love to Sakura.

Sunlight streamed in between the curtains, spilling across the bed to warm the tousled sheets. Sakura lay beneath him on her back, her naked skin sweaty and flushed. She was calm now, lost in some bright and peaceful post-coital euphoria. Moments ago she had been panting, her arms rigid around his shoulders, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths, gasping in his ear, her heart beating so fast and so hard he could hear it. Now, her eyes blinked languidly at the ceiling, tears pooling in the corners.

Sasuke hadn't done anything especially different with her. She just seemed much more sensitive than usual. Her climaxes seemed to take her to a place outside his understanding.

He was pleased, but confused at the same time.

It was unusual.

Sakura had never been a cold lover, but her passions recently had been insatiable. She was after him constantly. She couldn't seem to get enough.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

She sank deeper into the pillows with a long sigh, closing her eyes. "Yes!"

Her fingers caressed the tops of his hands, lengthening the intimacy and assuring him that she held him responsible for how good she felt. That was pleasant. He relaxed his body over hers, their stomachs and chests melding together, and stroked her hair until her eyes fluttered back open.

"I have to get up," he said. "I have to train the kid."

She nodded, still flushed. "I know. And I can't help today. Naruto needs me."

"He does?"

"He wants my help composing a letter."

Sasuke was puzzled.

Sakura gave a little shrug of her shoulders. "I don't know either. He wants to invite the Feudal Lords to Konoha. Something about funding for some programs. He wasn't very specific. Anyway, I can't be there for the training."

"That's fine," Sasuke said. "Don't get up."

Sakura smiled, closing her eyes again.

He rolled off of her and out of bed, leaving her lying naked on top of the sheets. She didn't move, both arms bent at the elbow, hands

thrown up above her head, and one leg curled. He appreciated the visual for a few moments. Sakura expressed insecurity about her body sometimes, but he saw no reason for it. She was the type he most preferred, slender and strong, with soft, perfectly formed breasts and shapely hips and legs.

He left her to rest and proceeded to wash and dress for the day. He didn't know why, but he felt... happy—happier at least than he had felt in a long time. The feeling was a little unsettling.

The sun was high in the sky by the time Itachi roused himself from bed and got ready for another day of training. As he donned his wrist guards and flexed his fingers he realized his arm didn't hurt anymore. It had been killing him yesterday. His head didn't hurt either.

He glanced out the window, noting the absence of shadows. It was so late. He had slept over thirteen hours.

Normally, he was up before the sun. For the past few weeks he had spent every morning training with Amaya and Haro and the afternoons and evenings with Sasuke and Sakura.

His long sleep didn't erase his memories.

Last night, the pain in his head had had him whimpering in his pillow for hours. By the time it started to fade, it was late. He hadn't heard his mother come home from her meeting with the Hokage, but he felt her presence when she entered his room and sat at the edge of his bed in the dark. She knew he was awake. She asked him how he felt.

He didn't remember quite what he had said to her. It came out in a garble of pained feelings. Mostly, he was just embarrassed—horribly, shamefully embarrassed. He had been glad of the dark because he didn't want to look at his mother's face. He was even glad of the headache as a distraction.

They talked. Well, mostly she talked and he listened, nodding and replying occasionally. It wasn't anything he didn't expect. He just had to confirm that he understood and agreed: he was too young, he shouldn't put himself in compromising positions, he shouldn't allow a teammate to dictate his actions, etc. His mother also made it clear that in the future Amaya, or any friend of his, was not allowed in the house, much less alone in his room, without her knowledge. Then she reminded him of what she expected of him, which he knew all too well. That was it. She didn't yell. There was no punishment. And there were no demands. But he understood her opinion, and to Itachi, his mother's opinion was law.

She was adamant on one point that concerned him: There was to be no further training with his team. Not today, at least. Not until she said otherwise. Itachi wasn't even allowed to see them.

Her edict had struck him forcefully, but when the sting faded, he realized he was relieved. He was thankful that he *couldn't* go to morning practice. Haro would be there, completely oblivious to the events of yesterday, so Amaya would have to go. She'd have to explain what happened.

Itachi got to sleep through it.

Morning practice was long over now. As he got dressed, he wondered what happened. Did Amaya tell Haro the truth?

He would find out when training resumed…assuming it did. His mother didn't say the team training was over for good. It *had* to be just a temporary reprieve. Itachi wouldn't know what to do if she forbade it entirely. The match was happening, and he only had a few days left. His mother had to know that, though she didn't comment on the match with Yukio. What she said was that she wanted to talk to Amaya's father. Itachi did not object. How could he? Nothing he said would counteract her decision.

When he was ready, Itachi checked his eyes in the mirror above the washstand. The floaters were gone. There didn't seem to be

anything wrong with his eyes. His face overall looked better, though. The extra sleep really had done him wonders. He actually felt stronger.

He left his room and made his way down the hall to Rina's. He knocked on her door.

"Rina?"

No answer.

He pushed her door open.

Rina lay face down, stretched out sideways across the bed, one arm flung out above her head, wrist extending beyond the mattress. Her pitch dark hair covered her upper back like a fan. He could see only one of her eyes, watching him distantly as he assessed her from the doorway.

"I've going to go train now," he said quietly. He remembered that she couldn't go, and he didn't say it to hurt her feelings, but because he wanted her to be informed where he had gone.

Awkward silence followed his words. She didn't move or acknowledge him, but he knew she was listening.

"Rina," he said with a heavy sigh. "It's stupid to fail on purpose. Why did you?"

She turned her face from him, burying it in the covers.

"Come on," he said. "Tell me."

She shook her head.

He tried to keep from sounding exasperated. "Just… improve your scores, okay? If you do, you'll be training with me again in no time. Maybe tonight we can work on your composition."

She mumbled something into the bed.

"What?" he asked. "Rina, I can't hear you."

Rina lifted her head. Her eyes were red, her face streaked with tears. "I *finished* it."

Itachi stood awkwardly for a moment, not knowing what to say. He had been promising Rina he would help her with her composition for weeks. How long had it been since he actually did? He couldn't remember. Of course, she didn't really *need* his help. Itachi didn't have his sister's gift for music. He could play what was put in front of him, and he enjoyed music, but he didn't have Rina's talent for it. That didn't make him feel less guilty. Ultimately, he knew what she really wanted was for him to just sit with her while she worked. She had to understand, though. It wasn't that he didn't like spending time with her. His fight with Yukio was really important.

He shifted his weight from foot to foot. "That's good," he said at length. "I look forward to hearing you perform it. Someday soon, okay?"

He meant that. If they could ever get a piano, it would be the first thing he'd do. He was sure there wasn't one in Konoha. Rina had been all over the village already, looking for anything *resembling* a piano to play her piece on, and would have mentioned it if she found something. If they couldn't find a piano, or something similar, she would just have to rewrite her compositions for different instruments. Maybe he could help her with that. Rina would probably be able to play the instruments they had in these lands if she tried; she could play almost anything.

He sighed. He couldn't delay much longer. Last night had been… eventful…for him, but Sasuke would have no knowledge of it, and Itachi was pretty sure he would have no interest, or sympathy, even if Itachi explained. "I have to go, Rina. Sasuke will be cross if I'm late. I really *am* sorry you can't come. Get your grades up, okay?"

She didn't answer.

"I'll see you tonight," he said softly, and shut her door. He heard her flop…audibly…on the bed. Maybe she was mad at him, but he didn't know what else he could do. It was her own fault she was failing. Being in a sulk about it wouldn't help.

Itachi retrieved his ninja gear from his room and went downstairs. The house was quiet. His mother must be out. He supposed she had gone to Amaya's. The thought gave him a chill. Deciding not to think about that, he left the house and proceeded directly to Sasuke's.

Sachio had been a Shinobi for forty-five of his fifty years. He had enrolled in the Academy at age five, back when Shinobi training was encouraged to begin as young as possible. He had been blessed with a focused mind, more so than his two older brothers—both dead now—and had been a star pupil from his very first days.

He became a Genin at age ten. He rose quickly in the ranks. He became very good at war and had lasted long at it, longer than most. As a Jounin, he was relied upon heavily for his ability to predict the movements of the enemy and counter intelligently, so he was often appointed team captain. The work of a Shinobi filled his waking hours, and his dreams too. He dreamed rarely, and was grateful for it. His dreams were usually times when he had failed, times when he had lost those he loved.

He was not a bitter man. Sachio had never desired—or thought to desire—any life other than that of a Shinobi. His allegiance was to the Leaf Village, the Land of Fire, and the Feudal Lords who governed it. He did not share the opinion of the young Hokage that it was an insult to be thought of as a tool. Sachio was proud to be considered useful.

Such was Sachio's way of thinking that he little understood the discontent some Shinobi felt toward the work of a Shinobi. Many of the younger Shinobi especially, he felt, complained, and sometimes

railed, about things that would not cause him to stir. He did his duty and that was enough. Increasingly, he found the troubles of the young confusing.

Thus it was that he regarded his daughter with consternation.

She had gone out only a short while ago to train with her team, and returned in under forty minutes. She had been startled to see him still in the house. It was unusual for him to be at home much past the dawn, but his mission was under delay.

He knew something was wrong. She stood in the middle of the room, halfway between him and the door, and would not look at him. Her fists were clenched and her eyes downcast. Come to think of it, she had said nothing to him last night either. But there were many days that they did not speak.

"I thought you had training," he said. "With Haro. And your other teammate."

"Itachi," she mumbled.

"Your teammate Itachi, yes."

She looked everywhere but at his face.

"Are you injured?" he asked her.

"No."

"Your teammates?"

"No."

Silence stretched.

"Then why do you not train? Your match is close."

"Itachi cannot train today," she said. "He wasn't there."

Sachio grunted, leaving no uncertain impression at to what he thought of the boy.

Amaya looked up then, brown eyes shining in the light, just as her mother's had once done.

"It's not his fault," she said. "He wasn't skipping. He…" She trailed off, staring at him. It seemed like she was trying to speak, but no words escaped her lips. Sachio didn't understand, but he was surprised when, suddenly, Amaya started to tremble. "It is my fault," she whispered.

He blinked.

Sachio had never planned to have a daughter. Nor had he ever expected to love a woman. When he met Amaya's mother, passions had awoken in him that he had never experienced, taking him by surprise, and without thought of the consequence. Those passions ruled him for a time and resulted in a child, to no great surprise, but in much uncertainty on his part. He had accepted the child as he accepted any other duty, assumed that her mother would know what to do in raising a little girl.

The death of Amaya's mother was swift and sudden, the result of a tactical error on a mission. Amaya had been little more than a toddler at the time, uncomprehending of what had happened and unable to process her father's grief. The event had left him unhinged in many respects. Though his record as a Shinobi during the time was flawless, there was much about Amaya's early years that he didn't remember living. He had no idea how he had raised her.

But she *was* precious to him. He remembered her birth very well-a pale flower born on a dark, dreary night. While her mother was in labor, rain had fallen in sheets, rapping against the windows with every shift of the wind. His first glimpse at his daughter's tiny face had filled him with hope. Since her first breaths, she was to him a counterweight to regret, and of dearer account than all the sorrows of his life collected.

To hear her speak with shame in her voice filled him with dread and anger.

"What is your fault?"

She just looked at him, his proud, strong daughter, visibly shaking.

"Nothing," she gasped. "It's stupid. Forget it." Still not meeting his eyes, she retreated past him into her room, shutting the door behind her.

Sachio had no words. He had never seen Amaya run from anything, nor had understanding of why she fled. He stood in the middle of the room, arms slack at his sides, questioning their conversation.

A firm knock at the door surprised him.

Sachio answered it without thinking, moving by rote and trained reaction.

He was not prepared to see *her* -that foreigner woman-standing in his doorway.

Sachio had never seen this woman up close. She was every bit the striking figure that she was rumored to be—very young by his standards, with a cold beauty and statuesque poise. She wore a white dress with short, billowy sleeves and a soft decorative silver belt cinched at the waist, like nothing a Shinobi would wear. The curves of her figure were soft, suggesting a pampered life. She even smelled like luxury—fumes of lavender-infused soap and gardenia. Her expression alone reminded him of the world he knew; whatever emotions she felt were locked behind a porcelain complexion and glittering dark brown eyes.

"Is Amaya here?" Lucia asked.

Before Sachio could respond, the door to Amaya's room burst open. His daughter appeared behind him, her face pale and eyes wild.

"You didn't need to come!" she gasped at Lucia.

Sachio was shocked by his daughter's behavior, though nothing in his expression or posture showed it. He had never heard Amaya use a tone like that, or look like that.

"I have a few words only," Lucia said to her in a cool tone. Her gaze flickered to him. "Sachio, is it?"

Sachio nodded in acknowledgement, as was polite.

She did not ask to come in, and he didn't invite her.

He had heard much about Lucia Van Alstyne since she had come to stay in the village. The Jounin traded both information and opinion, and much of it was mixed. He had heard that she was a victim, that she was a criminal, that she was a threat, and a great deal of speculation surrounding her personal character and history with Itachi Uchiha, which strongly inferred a sadomasochistic relationship.

Sachio had not known Itachi Uchiha personally. He was of a generation younger than Sachio and they had never operated together since Uchiha was in ANBU before he turned rogue, but his reputation was well-known.

Despite a lack of personal connection, he was offended by the likelihood that Lucia might have had some hand in encouraging sadism in a Shinobi—any Shinobi.

Sachio's view of the world was anything but black and white. He lived in a gray haze, having, like most Shinobi, committed acts that would curdle the blood of ordinary men. Violence warped people. He had seen it, and judgment was never simple when it came to the lives of ninja. But Sachio himself had never become warped. Killing did not make him feel powerful. Nor did it fill him with self-loathing and regret. He was a soldier. He carried out orders. Whatever hardships he endured, or caused others to endure, he hung on his duty, and moved on to the next job.

But he had seen others react differently, overcome by feelings of fear, rage, and hate. Sometimes they made mistakes. Sometimes those mistakes were made at a great cost, with lives lost, and loss more than anything changed a person. But of all the confusion he had seen overtake men in war, sadism was the least forgivable.

Sachio's disapproval came from direct experience. He had had personal dealings with sadists on missions. He had seen their complexes up close. They took an egotistical pleasure in cruelty. Some were Shinobi he had met in battle, men who showed enjoyment when hurting other men, who were thrilled by the hunting and the killing of their fellows, thinking themselves gods. Sachio had killed one sadist personally. That one had been an extreme case: A rogue Shinobi of another village who had become a kidnapper, rapist, and torturer. Some of his victims had been little more than children; all were civilians. Like any other mission, it was a duty to dispatch a target, but unlike most killings, dispatching a monster like that came with a degree of satisfaction. Such people were diseased. Even if they had once been whole, they had rotted to the point where sympathy was wasted. They had the appearance of men, but were in fact monsters, with souls blacker than devils.

It was hard to believe that anyone would *seek out* a sadist, or encourage cruelty in anyone, even if one was a masochist, but the rumor was that Lucia had done so, and that she had found Itachi Uchiha. Whether Itachi Uchiha was predisposed to sadism or had developed it through association with Lucia's company was unclear. Much about him had been a mystery.

But the matter was irrelevant. Itachi Uchiha was dead. What concerned Sachio was why this woman Lucia had come to the Land of Fire to satisfy her warped predilection, and why she had returned, with children in tow—children his own daughter was now bonded to defend. He found the entire situation cause for concern. He did not believe she was here for protection. He felt fairly convinced she was after something more. The Hokage said the matter was being

investigated and that Konoha was not in danger. Sachio deferred to the Hokage's judgment, but distrust remained.

"You have words?" he asked her. "Regarding my daughter?"

The chill in the air was palpable. Lucia did not overtly react to it. Perhaps she was used to a cold reception.

"I have," Lucia said. "I am sorry we are not better acquainted. You should know I am here out of concern."

Amaya was standing in the dark behind him, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

"Concern?" Sachio said skeptically. "For Amaya?"

"She had an outburst at my home yesterday."

Sachio wasn't sure he understood, or what he was supposed to say. "An… outburst?"

"Yes."

Sachio regarded her silently for a moment. "You need not have concern," he said finally. "Amaya is strong. I have faith in her abilities."

"Hmm," Lucia said. Folding her arms, she looked him straight in the eye, something other Jounin did not always do. It caught him off guard. "I doubt your faith is misplaced. I'm not concerned about Amaya's competence. Her abilities are quite well-tuned. She very nearly seduced my son."

The words nearly knocked him off balance. "Seduced?" He glanced at his daughter. She was as pale as a sheet. "Amaya?"

Amaya just stared straight at him. She didn't deny it.

Silence hung in room.

Sachio turned to Lucia. "You are misinformed. She's barely more than a child."

"Look at her."

"What?"

"Having lost my virginity within months of the age your daughter is now, I have a different opinion on what is possible. *Look* at her."

Sachio did a double take between Lucia and his daughter, both for the frankness with which Lucia shared such startlingly personal information and a reevaluation of his daughter's figure. When had she become so shapely? It seemed that months ago she was flat as a board with knobby legs like a deer and at least a foot shorter than she was now. He saw that she now had breasts, and long legs, and other curves. When had that happened? Where had the time gone? How had he not noticed that she had become such a beautiful Konoichi? But *seduced ?* Being preoccupied with other matters, Sachio himself had had little experience with women until his late twenties. He tried to imagine what Lucia was saying and couldn't, yet Amaya's expression confirmed that truth had been spoken.

"We resolved it," Lucia continued, "at least as that incident stands, but I felt it necessary to inform you. I think there is an underlying issue."

Sachio blinked, still trying to process. He had never seen shame on his daughter's face.

"She made a mistake," Sachio said quickly, defending her on impulse. "Amaya is a strong girl."

"I do not think she is so strong," Lucia said. "I think she tries very hard to seem like it for your sake. How much time to do you spend with her?"

His head was spinning. "I train her."

"Nothing else?" she asked. Her tone was quietly reproachful.

He was confounded and did not answer.

"You don't eat meals together."

"No."

"What are her hobbies other than training and fighting?"

Sachio was at a loss. "Hobbies?"

Lucia nodded as if he had confirmed something.

Amaya remained silent, but she stared at Sachio, her eyes wet.

Lucia sighed. "Well," she said. "Why don't you and Amaya come to dinner?"

"Dinner?"

"I shall invite Ino and Choji Akimichi as well. And my own children will be there, of course. Perhaps your other teammate, Haro?" Lucia offered to Amaya.

Amaya blanched.

Lucia's eyes glittered in silent calculation. She continued speaking as if they had both given enthusiastic responses. "Yes. That will be a good number." She paused, as if thinking about something. "Ino has mentioned to me that with the baby, she has need of an assistant in her flower shop."

"An assistant?" Sachio asked.

"A part-time job," Lucia explained. "For Amaya."

Sachio was so off-balance that it took him a few moments to realize that he had somehow transferred control of the situation to Lucia,

and had tacitly agreed to attend a dinner by not refusing the invitation. The realization was unsettling, but thinking about his daughter's…seduction…was more so. He didn't know what to do himself. "You think she needs a job?"

Lucia leveled him in a steady gaze. "I think she needs *something* beyond training. But what she needs most is you."

He understood then.

He drew himself up. "I have missions," he said quietly. "It is hard on Amaya, but the life of a Shinobi is hard."

"Clearly," Lucia said.

"My duty lies with the village."

"What of your duty to your daughter?"

"If I could be spared, I would stay with her more, but—"

"You can be spared," Lucia interrupted him. "I've been here long enough to see that there are Shinobi aplenty to pick up whatever business you set down."

"That's not up to me to decide."

"Talk to the Hokage."

"It's not that simple."

"I disagree."

They stared at each other.

Sachio was not used to being…disagreed with. As a rule, Shinobi followed orders. Sachio did not question authority and his subordinates did not question their captain. He frowned at this woman. It was easy to add arrogance to her list of character

qualities. Though his daughter concerned him, he was not about to be cavalier, or let an outsider instruct him.

"Let me be frank," Sachio said. "I find your interest in this affair suspect. I do not trust you."

"Fair enough," Lucia replied, her straight-forwardness unexpected. "I do not ask that you trust me."

"Why do you care about my daughter?"

"I care about my son, who must work with your daughter. Her stability affects him. My advice is free. You need not take it. I ask only that both of you come to dinner."

Sachio was silent for a moment, thinking. He did not believe dealings with this woman were 'just' anything. "Would you consider a bargain?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You wish to *bargain* with me? On your daughter's health?"

"I wish to bargain with you on extending to you my trust where my daughter is concerned."

She seemed intrigued, and folded her hands. "What is the bargain?"

"The Hokage wants to leave you in peace to your secrets."

"And you want me to trade my secrets for company at dinner? I am afraid not."

"Then you don't deny you have secrets?"

"I have many. Don't you?"

He paused, reflecting on that. "I went to see the Hokage recently. I suggested he have you interrogated."

Lucia's expression turned hard. "And you want me to submit to interrogation?"

"Yes, but the Hokage does not wish it. Yet I have heard that he revised his opinion shortly after our meeting. He desires that you *talk* to Konoha's interrogator."

"I have already agreed to this."

"Agreed but not done."

Lucia frowned. "I see. You think I will evade the request indefinitely. Very well. If you come to dinner with your daughter, I shall make good on my promise to go to Ibiki."

"When?"

"I suppose if I want my son's training to continue tomorrow, then I shall go today."

That shocked Sachio. "Today?"

"Yes," Lucia said. "Itachi's match with Yukio is days away. As it stands, he cannot train. He must train if he is to win. Your daughter is instrumental to his success. We must resolve this matter quickly so the team can recover."

Amaya was staring at Lucia with wide eyes. She seemed to be holding her breath.

Sachio regarded Lucia askance. "You will allow Ibiki to interrogate you?"

"I will answer the questions the Hokage has requested I answer," she said. "He wishes to know about my relationship with Itachi Uchiha in detail."

"But not what you are up to?"

She smiled. "Do you trust your Hokage, Sachio?"

His eyes shifted. "I do."

"Then let him worry about that."

This was not quite what Sachio wanted, but he supposed it was something. "Very well. But you will have to answer the questions *in full* . Not with paltry answers and evasions and half-lies as you have been rumored to dish out."

Lucia was silent for a moment. "Very well. I will answer in full. And if I do you will bring Amaya by for dinner?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. We have a bargain."

Sachio turned to his daughter. "Go find Haro. Explain to him this arrangement."

Amaya looked as if he had asked her to jump into a pit full of snakes. "Haro won't want—"

Sachio's expression hardened. "If what has been said here is true, you have broken your team. You must mend it. That is your mission. Go."

She stared at him. But then she nodded, looking unsteady, and slipped out the door.

Sachio turned back to Lucia. She stood on the doorstep, looking expectant.

"Ready?" she asked.

He frowned at her. "For what?"

"To see the Hokage," she said. "Didn't you want to ask for leave?"

Sachio did not think that would be possible. Missions were missions, and he had never missed one. But the suggestion surprised him for a different reason. "You want to go together?"

"Yes. How else will you be *sure* that I went to Ibiki today?"

This woman was becoming increasingly perplexing, but Sachio could not fault her logic. He nodded and followed her out the door.

It wasn't until they were halfway across the village that he realized what she had done. She was *using* his distrust of her. They were being stared at—and rightfully so. It wouldn't take long for word to spread that Sachio had been seen strolling in the company of the woman he had yesterday purported to hold in suspicion and contempt. And what could he say about it, except that she had come to him to keep a promise she had willingly made? She would come off looking dependable, and he would be no worse for it either.

Had she planned this? If she did, she must have a mind as precise and intricate as a clock, with thoughts like gears, fine-tuned to measure and act on the instant, as she could not have predicted the outcome of their meeting…could she? He suddenly wondered. What kind of person was this?

The contemplation filled his mind until they arrived at the center of the Leaf Village.

Sachio rarely set foot in the Hokage's office unless he was bidden. To do so twice in two days was unprecedented. He assumed that the Hokage would be busy and they would be bidden to wait upon appointment, as was usual. When they approached the attendants guarding the door in the corridor, Lucia spoke, making a request for an audience with the Hokage immediately, as if she expected to be seen whenever she had a mind. Shockingly, the attendants responded like this was the case. One went to ask the Hokage's permission. A moment later they were admitted. Sachio was amazed.

"Lucia?" the Hokage said, rising from his desk. He looked as astounded as Sachio felt. "You're here with Sachio?"

Two other jounin were in the room—Shikamaru and Sakura—both of them looking perplexed to see him and Lucia standing there together.

"I've come to see your interrogator," Lucia said mildly. "Is he available?"

Sakura's mouth dropped open. Sachio noted it. That one had never been the best at hiding her feelings.

"I think so," Naruto said. "Shikamaru? Would you find Ibiki for me?"

Shikamaru grunted, but he nodded and exited the room.

"Sachio?" Naruto asked. "Is there something you need?"

Sachio felt the Hokage's eyes on him, waiting for him to speak. Was there something he needed? Sachio had never voiced a need, not to any Shinobi, much less the Hokage, not unless it was essential to a mission.

"My daughter's match," he said. "My mission—"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the Hokage waved a hand in assent.

"We can give it to someone else," Naruto said. "I think Kiba is available. Sakura, will you check on Kiba's status? And Sachio's team. Then come back please?"

"Um, sure," she said.

Sachio felt like the world under his feet had just tipped and slipped away.

He was still standing there, robbed of his reason, when Ibiki arrived. Konoha's top interrogator was a hulking figure with a face crisscrossed with scars. Ibiki who took one look at Lucia and grunted.

She had a similar reaction, her lips pursing slightly, but said nothing. In silence, Ibiki gestured for her to come along, and in silence she followed him out of the room.

When Sasuke stepped out onto the porch, sunshine streamed down between passing clouds, saturating the leaves and flowers and bark with light and color. It was chilly but not cold—perfect weather for the kind of physical training he had in mind for the kid. Over his shoulder, he carried a cloth sack full of gear.

He was ready early-a rare occurrence recently. He sat down to wait.

Itachi appeared at the edge of the woods before long, fully dressed for training, the Konoha forehead protector glinting in the sunlight. He walked at a leisurely pace until he caught sight of Sasuke sitting on the step. Then he broke into a run.

"Sorry!" he gasped as he approached. "I—"

"You're not late," Sasuke said, rising from the porch stairs. He looked around, noting the absence of the girl. This was the second time in a row. Strange. She always used to come. "Does your sister have another test?"

Panic flickered across the boy's face. It would have been an unfamiliar expression on the face of Sasuke's brother, but Sasuke was getting used to how different the expressions were on this Itachi. It didn't seem quite so much like his brother's face anymore. The personalities were too different.

"She got in trouble," Itachi explained. "She's doing poorly in school, so she's not allowed to come."

She was doing poorly? Sasuke frowned, wondering about that. The little girl was not unintelligent. She watched him and Itachi train every day, and she paid close attention, eyes unblinking, not seeming to miss anything. The only time she didn't watch was when they were taking a break, for healing or repetition of forms, and she turned her attention to that notebook of hers. Concerned that she might be recording things she shouldn't, Sasuke had caught a glimpse of the pages with his Sharingan, enough to see that she was only working on some kind of musical composition, as the page was covered with musical notes penciled into stanzas. When she wasn't watching her brother learn, she was working at her craft, so she certainly was not lazy. Why would she be doing poorly in school? He frowned on the puzzle for a minute, and then dismissed it from his mind.

"Never mind," Sasuke said. "Come. We're going to the obstacle field."

Sasuke began walking and Itachi fell into his usual place behind him, keeping just far enough back not to force Sasuke to talk to him, but close enough that he wouldn't fall behind. Sasuke waved for him to get closer. He sensed Itachi's surprise, but the kid obeyed, quickening his pace until he was side-by-side with Sasuke.

"We're going to try weight training," Sasuke informed him.

"So I can learn Chidori?" Itachi gasped. Excitement widened his eyes.

Sasuke eyed him sideways. The kid had a good memory. "As I've already explained, Chidori requires a Sharingan to be effective. You'll be killed if you use it without the ability to predict your opponent's next move. But weight training will help you with everything, especially speed. Yukio is fast."

Itachi fell into quiet reflection as they walked to the obstacle field. It was a training ground located not far outside the village. Carefully arranged formations of rock, forest growth, and a variety of complicated climbing structures simulated unusual fighting grounds,

each leading into the next in a course. When they reached the field, Itachi stopped, examining it.

"You'll do it without weights to start," Sasuke said. "You should be strong enough. If you can't complete it in a standard time frame, there's no point in starting weight training yet."

"What's standard?"

"Six to eight minutes."

The boy nodded. He managed to mask his fear, but Sasuke could sense his unease…and determination. The kid had proven he wasn't a quitter. Sasuke would make use of that. Genin often underestimated this course and either couldn't complete it at all or completed it way off time. Ten minutes wasn't uncommon for a first go. To set the standard at six to eight minutes was an unrealistic expectation for a Genin of his experience, but Sasuke was counting on Itachi's resilience to failure to push him to a higher standard.

"How's your arm?" Sasuke asked him.

"Better," Itachi said, holding his shoulder and swinging his arm a few times. "I rested it."

With replying, Sasuke set down the bag of weights and other tools and took out a stopwatch. "Start on the far end with the climbing wall and make your way toward me. Don't skip anything. Concentrate on conserving power and pushing forward. I'll clock you for speed."

Itachi obeyed the instruction, leaving Sasuke at the finish line and trotting down the far end of the field where a climbing wall initiated the start of the course.

"Ready!" the kid called.

"Begin!" Sasuke shouted back.

He pushed the button when Itachi's fingers wrapped around the first hand hold in the climbing wall.

Sasuke expected Itachi to struggle. Itachi had struggled at hand-to-hand fighting. He had struggled at learning jutsu. He had struggled at weapons. But the kid was…not struggling.

He was stunning. He scaled the climbing wall in seconds. He was up and over it and sliding to the next thing without wasting any energy on unnecessary movement. His expression was focused, his efforts concentrated. He seemed to have analyzed the course in the few seconds that he had had to look at it before he was told to begin.

Sasuke masked his shock when, panting hard but still full of energy, the boy crossed the finish line. He rested, hands on his knees, taking deep, gulping breaths, and looked up at Sasuke.

Sasuke didn't say anything. He just stared, amazed at the time blinking at him: 5:48.

Itachi straightened. His face was anxious. He licked his lips. "Can I try again?"

"You will do it again," Sasuke said.

Without hesitation or complaint, Itachi nodded and turned on his heel, about to head back to the starting point.

"With the weights," Sasuke said. Slowly, he allowed a small smirk to twist his lips.

Itachi stopped and turned. He stared at Sasuke, his face frozen in an expression of incredulity.

Sasuke tossed him the watch. "You were under time."

The room where Lucia was to talk to Ibiki was more like a parlor than a torture chamber. There were windows with curtains, comfortable seating, and a mini bar. Sunlight streamed across the wood panel floors and ornate rugs.

Lucia knew it was disarming on purpose. She reclined in one of the oversized chairs, an untouched glass of sake in her hand, legs crossed beneath her white skirts, trying to appear at ease while evaluating Konoha's interrogator circumspectly over the rim of her fluted glass. Ibiki sat in a chair opposite to her. His impressive structure made the furniture look diminutive.

"I'm surprised you came to me so quickly," Ibiki said. "I thought you would need some time to think about your history with Itachi Uchiha before we talked."

Talked.

Lucia tried to imagine this hulking, scarred figure with his wrapped head and stone-hard expression as a counselor and not an interrogator—per the Hokage's intent—but it proved quite impossible to conceive.

"I have been thinking about him a great deal since I returned to these lands," she replied, reclining her cheek against her fist, elbow propped on the curved armrest the padded chair. "I believe I recall everything you would require."

That was true. Everything here reminded her of Itachi Uchiha. She had had more than a few unsettling flashbacks, remembering thoughts and feelings she assumed she had forgotten years ago. Some of those memories had caused her anxiety—the worst being during Naruto's exhibition match against Sasuke when Sasuke went down. She thought she had come to terms with why. Sasuke looked a great deal like his brother and it had stricken her to watch him collapse. This conclusion surprised and saddened her, but there was nothing she could do about it. It was in the past. Itachi Uchiha was ten years dead.

Ibiki nodded. "I want to be clear," he said. "The Hokage has set me a very specific task. I am not to pressure you for answers, nor am I to question you outside of your sadomasochistic relationship with Itachi. You should also know that I am not here to judge you. I suspect nothing you say will surprise or alarm me. However, if you wish to pass on a question, just say so and we will move on."

She nodded. She had to admit that this Ibiki had a surprisingly easy manner about him. Lucia expected this ninja interrogator to be a blunt, coarse sort of person, but Ibiki was proving smooth beyond measure. She had heard rumors that he was renowned for his success in divulging information through persuasion of speech and rhetorical tricks as much as…cruder methods. Of course, he had experience in cruder methods too, which is why Naruto had chosen him. He was the most professional person in the village for Lucia to speak to regarding her predilection for pain. But he was showing himself to be diplomatic as well.

She smiled at this…counselor.

Secretly, she wondered what the Hokage was playing at. She knew he wanted to earn her trust. He had been working hard at it for months. And she had evaded his efforts for months. Perhaps he was frustrated that talking to her only got him so much intelligence. Yet this was a harsh change of direction. She would comply, of course. Her path had been determined long before she arrived at the Leaf Village. She was committed.

"Let's begin," Ibiki said.

Lucia tilted the glass of sake to her lips and swallowed. The sake was smooth, but strong, burning lightly as it slid down her throat. She didn't worry about saying too much. She thought it generous of them to offer a relaxant.

She was getting the better end of this bargain. Her promise to Naruto and her promise to Sachio were the same, and from that promise, she was strengthening her relationship with both. At the same time,

nothing she revealed about her sex life with Itachi would compromise her plans. She actually didn't understand why the Hokage wanted to know. It might worsen his opinion of her, but she couldn't think of anything valuable he would learn; still, she was willing to play the game.

Ibiki leaned forward with his elbows on his thighs, hands folded in front of him. His expression was a little grim, but not threatening. He looked her straight in the eye.

"Did you have a safe word?"

Lucia set the empty glass down on the table and returned his gaze frankly.

So. He did know something about this. And he wasn't embarrassed to discuss it.

That would make this less awkward.

"Yes," she replied.

A safe word was a common device used in a sadomasochistic relationship. It was what the trust was built upon. Theoretically, if she spoke the safe word, it meant she was against the direction the game had taken, or that she had had enough. Her partner would have to stop. It had to be something obviously out of context to the situation. It couldn't be 'no' or 'stop' or 'don't.' She could scream those as much as she wanted and it wouldn't mean anything.

"Did you ever use it?"

She hesitated. "Not in the beginning. Things…changed later. Toward the end, I did use it. "

"Did he comply?"

"No."

Failure to observe the safe word was a sign of a sadist-someone who broke the rules of trust, seeking to cause more terror and more pain than the subject wanted. That was what she had set out to find, of course. That was why she had wanted him. She was attracted to the reality of cruelty. She accepted that something in her was twisted beyond a sexual fetish. Knowing it didn't change her mind. She had wanted someone who would truly terrify her. That was what she set out to find, and that was what she had found. Or so she had thought.

"Toward the end?" Ibiki questioned, eyebrows rising slightly.

"What happened at first, and what happened later, were very different."

"How did it start?"

Ibiki wanted the whole story. He would not be satisfied with pieces. She nodded thoughtfully. She had promised to divulge the relationship in full.

"I lied to Sasuke," she said. "I told him that the second time I was in this country I ran into Itachi on accident. But that's not the truth. I sought him out. I was looking for someone. I wanted someone to hurt me. Our first time together was startlingly pleasant. I thought, given his history, that he might be what I was looking for. He was… surprised to see me, but not displeased. I propositioned him. He was interested."

More than interested. She could still remember that. Finding him had taken some effort, requiring careful questions, descriptions, and a few bribes. She found him in a tea house. When he laid eyes on her face, the recognition had been immediate. She sat down beside him, near breathless with her own boldness. She established physical contact immediately and on purpose, touching his wrist. He didn't shy from her touch, but she felt his pulse quicken, despite that his face was a stone carving. It gave her confidence. She told him where he could find her and then left him alone to decide. He was on her doorstep that same night.

"I told him what I wanted," she continued to Ibiki. "We established boundaries, and at first, he mostly did what I told him to do. I was surprised, actually, that he needed guidance. It was clearly not something he had tried before, but he learned quickly. He became more creative over time, and it was satisfying. That was what it was like in the beginning."

Ibiki was silent.

Lucia poured herself a second glass of sake. It bit like the first.

"But you didn't use the safe word?"

"No."

"So you weren't frightened."

"No. There was pain, but it was typical stuff."

"Were you bound?" Ibiki asked.

"Sometimes."

"Did he physically strike you?"

"Yes."

"With blunt weapons?"

"Sometimes."

"With his hands?"

"Yes."

"On the face?"

She paused. "Not that I recall."

"Did he choke you?"

She frowned in thought. "He would grab me by the throat, but he had never cut off my air completely for long."

"And this was mingled with sex?"

"Yes."

"What were your limitations?" Ibiki asked. "You said you set boundaries."

"No visible marks. And, of course, I didn't want to die."

Ibiki nodded. Lucia could tell he understood. The face was too prominent and choking could be accidentally lethal. She didn't feel any regret. She had never attempted to subdue her masochistic tendencies. She was not ashamed of them.

"Did he cut you with blades?" Ibiki continued.

"He seemed to, but there were no wounds and no scars. It must have been illusion. It felt real."

"There was blood?"

"Sometimes."

"A lot of it?"

"Not then."

"So later?"

"Yes. Like I said, things changed. After awhile, he had to leave. He had a mission. I didn't see him for a time."

Ibiki nodded. No doubt, he knew more about Itachi's missions than she did. Lucia had never inquired of Itachi where he went or why.

She knew the topic was forbidden.

"But he saw you again after his missions?"

"Yes."

"And it was different?"

And that was the crux.

Ibiki seemed to be thinking deeply, his forehead scrunched and his eyes focused on the floorboards in front of his feet. He rubbed his chin and looked up. "What was different?"

Lucia answered. "He wasn't satisfied with what we had done before. He wanted to... up the ante, I guess you could say. Things got more intense. A lot more intense."

"And you used the safe word?"

"I did, but the safe word became meaningless."

"Meaningless?"

"There was nothing safe about what he did to me," Lucia explained. "If it had been real, and not genjutsu, I would have died. But I never knew what was genjutsu and what wasn't. He was good at that. I did use the safe word, but he ignored me."

She recalled having been suffocated, slashed, stabbed, burned, and even maimed, her hands and legs broken, her eyes scorched by fire, but the details were fuzzy, like a dream. Mostly, she just remembered the terror of it, the feeling of helpless panic, and the indescribable pain. The worse it got, and the more repetitive, the more numb she felt. She endured it until she thought she had been killed. And then she woke up.

"Did it grow more intense over time?" Ibiki asked.

"Yes. Steadily increasing." As if he just couldn't get enough.

"Can you describe it in detail, starting at the beginning?"

She tried. Ibiki listened attentively, giving nothing away with his face. Even though it was genjutsu, it felt very real to her, as he was so good at blurring the lines. She remembered having been tied up with ropes or cords before being cut with knives and thinking 'this is real' only to wake up to discover there had never been any restraints at all. Sometimes he would taunt her. Sometimes he was silent. She would be blindfolded, naked, her hair cut, her body bleeding. She described as much as she could remember. Always it started out real, with her for sure thinking it was real, only to wake up unharmed.

"Each session would continue until I was far beyond my limit," she said. "Almost always, he kept at it until I would pass out, or go catatonic. When I came to, I would find myself unmarred."

"Were these sessions sexual, as the first stage had been?"

She hesitated. "Rarely. Once or twice maybe, but he was absorbed mostly with just hurting me. It was only afterward, when I came to, that he wanted my body. It became increasingly separated, like he had exhausted some other part of himself. It was like he had split into two different people."

Ibiki was silent, absorbing this.

Lucia didn't say anything for a moment.

She wondered if she had broken something in Itachi Uchiha's personality-if her desires had been something he couldn't handle amidst whatever else he was handling. Maybe she had mixed things that, for him, should not have been mixed. At the time, she had assumed a Shinobi with a history of violence such as his would be unmoved by anything she might request, but the way he had hurt her, the way he seemed to *really* want to hurt her, was far beyond what she expected, though it was strangely freeing. And the

gentleness with which he later ravished her had been equally strange. If she had snapped something in him, she regretted it; that wasn't at all what she had wanted. Especially as—for her—the contrast had resulted in a kind of intensity she had never known. There had been some beautiful, beautiful nights, with exquisite body-and-mind shattering moments, like nothing she had experienced before or since.

"Interesting," was all Ibiki said, leaning back thoughtfully in the chair.

Lucia was surprised.

"Was there more sex or more torture?" Ibiki asked her.

"There was nearly always both when I saw him, but they were separate."

"But initially, it was more mingled? And it wasn't too cruel?"

"Yes," she said. He seemed to be arriving at the same conclusion she had. Through her, Itachi had learned to indulge in cruelty. "Since coming here and reflecting, I have wondered if I was in error to choose him," she admitted. "It may be something he would never have discovered if he hadn't met me."

Ibiki regarded her silently. She wondered if she sounded apologetic.

"How did he react?" Ibiki asked.

"React?"

"When hurting you."

Lucia was puzzled. She tried to remember Itachi Uchiha's reactions, but it was difficult. He had showed very little expression most of the time, and of course she had been very…distracted…by the pain. She recalled that he was deaf to her pleas, always pressing her to take more abuse than she could really handle—than any human being could handle. "He was usually cold," she said to Ibiki, "Even

when he smiled, or taunted me. He was like a stone. Like a machine."

"And after?"

She shrugged. "That was sex. It was different. He still didn't express much feeling, but he did enjoy it."

Ibiki nodded. "In the beginning," he said, "when it was more mingled, did *you* enjoy it?"

"Yes. Very much."

"And later?"

She struggled to answer this question. "When it was beyond my threshold, it was beyond it," she said simply. "No, I can't say those sessions were enjoyable."

"It didn't arouse you?"

"No."

"But you didn't stop seeing him."

"No. I must have wanted him to hurt me because I allowed him in to do it."

That was what confused her so. It wasn't that he caused her pain; it was that he caused her pain she did not like, pain that wasn't sexual in nature at all. Yet she always opened the door to him. Without fail. Even when it got really bad and she stopped looking forward to the pain. Sometimes she would cry before it began. Sometimes she even begged not to do it—to skip it. He always ignored her. But she kept opening the door. That was one of the reasons she felt assured that something had gone quite wrong with her. She had let it get out of her control. She had allowed him to take it too far. And that was her fault.

"But it didn't continue forever," Ibiki finished. "You told Sasuke that it stopped after a time. There was the third stage?"

She nodded.

This is what she really had wanted to avoid discussing. It was this, more than anything else, that made her feel that she had erred in her assessment of Itachi.

"There was a time that it snowed," she said. She paused. "It had been some time since I had seen him."

He arrived unexpectedly, when the flakes were just starting to fall. He had taken her to the bed immediately.

"I assumed there would be another session," she said. "Pain followed by pleasure, but he refused. I asked why. He just said he wanted something different from me."

She remembered it clearly. He didn't want to hurt her? Did he not want any satisfaction? He had been lying on his back, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. She asked him what he wanted then. He made his request in even tones, as if he had been rehearsing what to say.

She had been so startled by his words that she had risen suddenly from the bed, thrown on a robe and removed herself to another room, where she stared out the window for awhile, watching the snow turn the outside world white and strange. It reflected how she felt inside.

"What did he want?" Ibiki asked. He seemed genuinely curious.

Lucia closed her eyes.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

She hesitated. That was true. Given the Hokage's limits, she didn't, but she sort of wanted to. This man, Ibiki, seemed to understand her

in a way the others didn't. Maybe he would understand this too. She felt so lost about it.

"He asked me to create an illusion for him," she said.

Ibiki looked surprised. "You? An illusion?"

"I was confused, as you might imagine," she continued. "I don't know genjutsu. But that wasn't what he meant. He wanted me to pretend, he said, that every day forward was like this day. He told me to forget what was before, forget that he was a Shinobi and to forget whatever or whoever I was. When he came by, he wanted me to pretend like I lived in the house I was renting, that I had always lived there. I told him I didn't understand what he was saying. I made him explain it again. I told him it wouldn't be real. He just smiled and said it was a new game. He wanted to play a new game."

Ibiki looked as stunned as she still felt.

Lucia could feel something inside herself unraveling. She couldn't remember the last time she had cried, but she felt dangerously close to it now. She held the urge back with an effort. It wasn't the request Itachi had made that upset her. That was easy to do. It was rather like he wanted her to play house with him. It was what it *meant* . The guilt threatened to bury her.

"That is when I first thought I must have had him wrong," she said. "Maybe I had misjudged him. Maybe he wasn't a sadist. Maybe he had become one because of me. To want to play a game like that, he couldn't have been one always. I thought maybe I had pushed him over the edge."

"Did you refuse?" Ibiki asked.

She shook her head. "I couldn't. I felt… I don't know how I felt, guilty, I suppose. I didn't refuse."

"He wanted you to pretend like you were ordinary people who loved each other."

That was cutting it to the quick. No, Ibiki did not waste time. It *had* kind of felt like that. And that had frightened and confused her more than anything. "But it wasn't real," she said. "He even called it a game. Those were his words."

"Interesting," Ibiki said. "But you did agree."

"Yes."

"Did he stay nights?"

"If he could. It was a warm place to sleep."

Ibiki nodded. "You slept beside him?"

Lucia's hands felt cold. She rubbed them together, staring at her thumbs. Was she trembling? "He had trouble sleeping in beds. He wasn't used to it. Usually, he slept on the floor." She paused. "But he didn't object if I joined him."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

Ibiki leaned back, throwing one arm over the back of his chair. "Did you feed him meals?"

"Yes."

"Did you lend him money? Provisions?"

"Sometimes."

"Did you talk?"

"About mundane things."

Oddly, Ibiki seemed pleased. She wondered at that. She thought he would disapprove. Maybe it was just this man's temperament, which was much less emotional than Sasuke's… or Naruto's. But still, it surprised her. Wasn't it a ludicrous situation? And wasn't Itachi Uchiha one of Konoha's most despised villains? At the least, shouldn't assisting a known fugitive, one wanted for slaying his own kin, be met with contempt? Shouldn't pretending to love one be even stranger—and more dangerous? But decency was decency. A Shinobi was a Shinobi, and criminal was still a human being. Maybe that's what he approved of.

"Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"Not even like he had in the beginning?"

"After what he did to me later, that would have felt silly."

"But you still slept together?"

"Yes."

"And did the sex satisfy you?"

She nodded. That had surprised her. With Gehard, she was rarely satisfied unless she was abused in some way. She didn't know what the difference was with Itachi. Maybe he had broken her too.

"How long did this…new game… go on?" Ibiki asked.

Lucia took a breath. "Not long," she said. "His… people needed him. Something was happening. The last time I saw him, he was sick." Her chest felt tight, just as it had when watching Naruto beat Sasuke down in the arena. She tried to relax. "He coughed up blood."

Ibiki straightened, crossing both arms over his chest. "He was not long from dying. What did you do?"

"I wanted to call a physician," she said. What else was there to do with a dying man? "But Itachi was adamant that I do no such thing. He said he knew what was wrong with him and that there was nothing to be done. He had medicine on him, but it was near empty. He said it was effective as a treatment, if not a cure." She paused. "So I had it analyzed and more procured."

"That must have been expensive."

She shrugged. "I had connections and I had money. I used them."

There was a moment of silence.

"I'm surprised," Ibiki admitted.

"Why?"

"You took care of him."

"We were pretending," she said quietly. "I just—"

She froze, thinking about that. Hadn't she said before that if you pretend something long enough, it became real? She had been referring to Itachi's cruelty, but it couldn't it also be true of love? Was she really pretending? She had felt *something* for him.

The possibilities were more daunting than a first glance might imply. She thought she had changed Itachi by making him pretend to be a sadist. Was it possible Itachi had turned her game against her? Had he tried to show her she could love if she pretended to? Or had he wanted her to pretend for himself? To change himself before he died? It had to be at least one of the two.

Either one would make him a better person than she was, and a better man than a murderer should be. It didn't make sense. She didn't understand. She didn't know what to say.

Ibiki was silent, watching her. She had been cognizant of his silence throughout; he gave her very little feedback, asking more questions

than he made comments, which encouraged her to talk more. It was her same tactic turned against her.

In that moment, she felt more clearly than she ever had that Shinobi were dangerous.

She did not say anything more. She could scarcely think.

At length, Ibiki shook his head.

"I apologize," he said. "I may have overstepped my bounds. I was… interested." He rose from his chair, stretching to his full height. "I have learned all I need. This looks to have been emotionally draining for you. If you want, you may go."

She rose at his behest. She displayed calm, and calm eventually came. Actually, she felt rather good. Nothing had changed, but some of the tension she had been holding was gone. Perhaps that was what the Hokage had intended? She wondered. If so, that was even more interesting than Ibiki. And perhaps more dangerous. She may have miscalculated.

"Has this been of any value?" she asked pointedly.

"I'll speak to the Hokage about that," Ibiki said. "I'm sure he will want to see you when he's determined what it means, if anything. For now, you should go home and rest." He opened the door for her. "It was a pleasure."

"You are quite good at what you do, Ibiki," she said. "I must say."

He smiled, the corners of his lips turning upward. It was the strongest reaction she had seen in him since they began talking. "Thank you," he said, and to her surprise, favored her with a slight bow.

"My regards to the Hokage," she murmured as she passed him on her way out, and meant it.

Naruto sat across from Sakura, reviewing the composition to the Feudal Lords that they had crafted together. Naruto had dictated the contents, but it was Sakura's handwriting, which was much nicer than his. After his discussion with Shikamaru he felt he had to take a gamble for the sake of the village. It was gutsy, but that was what he was known for. He was requesting an in-person meeting with the Feudal Lords. He had no idea if they would agree to come.

"What are you going to say to them?" Sakura asked curiously.

Naruto took a deep breath. What *was* he going to say? He only had a vague idea. "Oh, you know. Business stuff."

"It's kinda close to the match," Sakura muttered. "You don't think the Grass delegates will be a risk? They'll be here."

"No," Naruto said. "If the Feudal Lords agree, we'll send an escort. And they'll be safe in the village. They might want to watch the match as well. I hope so. It would be good for morale."

It doesn't even matter who wins , he thought privately. Both contestants were Leaf Genin. As long as they fought bravely and well, it would be an opportunity to show the Feudal Lords what a promising crop of young students the Leaf had in its rosters. It might help his case. It would also demonstrate to the rest of the village that the Feudal Lords took an interest in them. That never hurt.

"That's more pressure for Itachi," Sakura muttered.

"We don't have to tell him. We don't even know if they're going to be here."

She nodded absently.

A knock sounded at the door. "Hokage?"

Naruto and Sakura exchanged startled glances. It was Ibiki.

"That was fast," Sakura whispered. "I thought—"

Naruto nodded.

They had been avoiding talking about it, like an elephant in the room. While he and Sakura composed letters, Lucia was being… interviewed…in a nearby room. Why was it over so quickly? Naruto had expected a much longer session, given how fond Lucia was of silence and evasion.

Naruto couldn't tell anything from Ibiki's tone of voice, but hope surged anyway. He had been sitting on pins and needles since it had occurred to him that a session with Ibiki might be exactly the piece he needed. Now he was about to find out if he was right.

"Come in," he said hurriedly.

Ibiki opened the door, let himself in, and quietly shut it. Lucia was not with him.

Sakura glancing at Naruto for direction.

"You can stay," he assured her. "The result of this concerns Sasuke, and I'd rather you hear it first. You might as well get it from the source."

Sakura nodded mutely.

"How is she?" Naruto asked Ibiki.

"Overwrought, I think," Ibiki said. "I sent her home."

"What did she say?" Sakura asked. "You weren't gone that long. Did she say anything?"

Ibiki smirked. "She said enough."

Naruto just shook his head. "You're amazing, Ibiki."

"I don't think I can take all the credit," Ibiki said. "She clearly came with a mind to be open. But she has ample control. It wouldn't have been so easy if she was determined to stay silent."

"I wonder what she said to Sachio," Sakura muttered, "or he to her?"

Naruto wondered that too. Seeing them arrive together had been a surprise. They must have talked about something. Their kids were on the same team, so perhaps it was that, though he couldn't imagine how it had transpired. Whatever the events, it had turned out well. He couldn't have hand-selected a better witness to Lucia's cooperation than Sachio.

"Is she really a masochist?" Sakura asked.

"Oh, she's a masochist all right," Ibiki answered. "However…" He paused.

"What?" Naruto asked.

"She's not the type I expected," Ibiki said. "There's more going on with her than just a desire for pain. She does seem to have that predilection, but she wanted something else too." He looked thoughtful. "More importantly, based on what she told me, I don't think Itachi was a sadist."

Sakura jumped a little.

"What makes you think so?" Naruto asked eagerly. It was difficult to keep breathing normally and not look excited.

Sakura's reaction was more skeptical. "Do you think Itachi was just… humoring her?"

"No," Ibiki replied. "From what Lucia's divulged, Itachi was more than a willing participant. He seriously tortured her. But from what I can tell, it didn't please him to do it."

Sakura's eyes were wide.

"A true sadist is *looking* to hurt someone," Ibiki explained. "They fantasize about it and they cross the line in their excitement—eventually doing criminal damage."

"You said he seriously tortured her," Sakura said.

"He did torture her," Ibiki said, "but Lucia described it as lacking emotional investment-almost clinical."

"Clinical?" Sakura asked.

Ibiki nodded. "In the beginning, they had what I would call an ordinary sado-masochistic relationship. Later, it was outright torture. What lovemaking they did occurred separately."

Naruto was getting even more excited. But Sakura looked confused. "How is that not crossing the line?"

"She described him as controlled," Ibiki said. "Hurting her didn't seem to stimulate him. That's strange." Ibiki rubbed his chin. "It's possible that Itachi behaved with Lucia like any dedicated Shinobi does in battle: he tried to compartmentalize his humanity while doing a job to a client's satisfaction. As he lived most of his life like that, he would be well practiced at it. It may *look* like sadism, but essentially it's not."

Sakura gaped. "But she wasn't a client! She wasn't *paying* him. Why would he do that?"

Naruto was thinking rapidly. If Ibiki was going to conclude what he hoped he would conclude, then this whole thing had been worth it. Still, even if he was right, he had the same question as Sakura. Why do it?

"Perhaps he loved her," Ibiki suggested.

"Love?" Sakura demanded. "You call that *love* ?"

Ibiki shrugged. "Well, maybe not as you would think of it, but at the least, I suspect he was grateful."

Sakura closed her mouth.

"The life of a Shinobi is a hard one," Ibiki continued. "It was harder in Itachi's day and a rogue Shinobi would have the hardest life of all. He was completely alone. He couldn't trust anyone. We know how well Lucia keeps her silence. Itachi would have viewed her as an extraordinary gift."

Sakura looked troubled. "But what she made him do…" she mumbled.

"He never actually damaged her," Ibiki said. "Not permanently. Most of what Itachi did was illusionary."

Sakura shook her head. "I can't think it makes much difference."

Ibiki smiled. "I think perhaps you are misunderstanding masochism, Sakura. It *can* be harmful. It *can* be unhealthy. But not always. There are people who manage to engage in sex acts of that type in a perfectly functional way. If the right precautions are taken, it can actually be therapeutic."

"Therapeutic?"

"In the same way any kind of suffering can be therapeutic. Pain is a kind of communication, perhaps the best kind."

"I would think there are better therapies!"

"Perhaps," Ibiki replied, "but no therapy is effective if the recipient isn't ready or able to receive it. The bond a masochist forms with a partner is one of deep understanding and trust. It has to be, because it requires ultimate surrender. In my opinion, Lucia craves that more than pain, and she seems to have found it with Itachi, however briefly, and however incredible that might seem to you."

Sakura didn't look up. She seemed to be thinking.

"I'll warrant that Lucia might benefit from counseling," Ibiki admitted. "There are things she did not tell me, wounds she was holding back, perhaps even from herself. There is likely a source reason for why she feels unable to form a bond in a more regular fashion, and why she allowed Itachi to torture her. But in my opinion, she is a functional masochist. For someone of my profession, judging her would be hypocritical."

Naruto nodded thoughtfully. He was glad he had asked Ibiki to do this. It had been a risk, but it seemed to have worked. Naruto had wanted to form a bond with Lucia himself. He had wanted her to trust him. But she had only frustrated his efforts. Looking at it as Ibiki did, it was no wonder she couldn't connect with him. Despite his good intentions, Naruto didn't understand Lucia. The best advice Sakura had given him was that he couldn't expect to empathize with everyone. But he didn't need to. He had a whole village of people with experiences he could use.

Naruto leaned forward. "Let's get back to Itachi," he said. "If he wasn't a sadist, what was he?"

"I can't be entirely certain," Ibiki said. "By Lucia's testimony, he didn't *enjoy* inflicting pain, so I wouldn't call him a sadist. I suspect Itachi was playing the role with Lucia, but was committed to doing it convincingly. Of course, it may have had an impact on him. We Shinobi know better than anyone that we become what we do. Lucia showed some feelings of guilt in this respect. "

"That's what upsets Sasuke about her," Sakura mumbled. "That she made him a sadist. Lucia worried about that?"

"She expressed regret." Ibiki replied.

Naruto closed his eyes. Was *that* what Lucia regretted? That was truly unexpected.

Ibiki continued. "Interesting to me is that she seemed surprised that she still enjoyed his company even after he stopped hurting her. This is what makes me suspect that the bond of trust is what she desired. Pain is her means of getting to intimacy. She likes it for that reason. She isn't the type to get a thrill from making others cruel."

"Okay," Naruto interjected. "But Itachi *did* really torture her, right? Why make her suffer—even in an illusion—punishment that would kill her? If the bond was what she wanted, likely she would have been satisfied with less."

Ibiki nodded. "Precisely."

"Maybe he *was* becoming a sadist," Sakura said, "but then stopped when he realized she was changing him?"

"That was what Lucia guessed," Ibiki said, "and why she feels guilty. In an ordinary man, I could conceive it. But he showed no thrill for it. That is too significant to ignore. Besides, we mustn't forget that Itachi was *already* a murderer. There is no escaping that fact. So I must conclude that Itachi Uchiha was never a sadist—at least not as a result of meeting Lucia."

"So he was…normal?" Sakura asked.

"Normal is a relative term," Ibiki replied. "Actually, given his history, I suspect Itachi was another type of masochist-one who is able to transfer his own desire for pain to another. It has the same result. But since the intention is to care for another person, I don't consider it the same as sadism."

Sakura put a head to her forehead. "Wait. You're saying that hurting *her* hurt *him* , but… she liked it, so he found it… cathartic?"

"I believe so," Ibiki said. "Initially. But his objective seemed to have changed mid-course."

Naruto skin broke into goose bumps.

"Can you summarize?" Sakura mumbled. "This is getting confusing."

Ibiki cleared his throat. "In my professional opinion," he said, "Itachi initially agreed to enter into a sadomasochistic relationship with Lucia for the same therapeutic release she sought. This enabled both to be as close as either could come to intimacy. However, I believe that later sessions when the torture was more intense and more separated were not about masochism at all. Nor was it a slip into sadism."

Sakura's brow furrowed.

Ibiki took a deep breath. "I arrived at this conclusion first actually," he said. "The rest of what I have told you I unraveled from working backward from this premise, but I feel sure on my premise. Lucia described to me in detail what Itachi did to her. And I recognized it exactly." He paused.

Naruto could scarcely breathe.

Ibiki smiled, enjoying their anticipation. "What Itachi did—step by deliberate, incremental step—wasn't torture. It was torture resistance. He was *training* her."

Sakura's face was a sight. Her lip was caught between her teeth, her eyes wide. " *Training* ?"

"Yes," Ibiki said. "Torture training is a structured process, and an unmistakable one. I've been through it and I've taught it. It looks and feels very much like torture, but the aim is different. Itachi must have learned it in Anbu. After he indulged Lucia's need for intimacy, once she trusted him, he prepared her to withstand interrogation. He did it by the book."

"Prepared her?" Sakura whispered. "Why? For what?"

"I don't know," Ibiki said. "Assumingly, he wanted her to be able to keep her secrets."

Naruto could barely contain himself. "It would mean he was on her side, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would," Ibiki said. "To go to that length, I suspect he must have had some idea of who she was or what she was protecting. And approved. Or at least didn't object. So he helped her, though he didn't tell her. When he felt she was sufficiently prepared, he ended it."

"Ended it?" Sakura said. "He stopped seeing her?"

"No. He still saw her."

"But he stopped torturing her?"

"Yes. Their relationship changed."

"Changed to what?" Sakura asked, looking puzzled.

"According to Lucia, Itachi wanted her to pretend that they were ordinary people. He was dying by then. He seemed to want comfort before it was time for him to meet Sasuke. In the end, Sasuke was more important to him than anything. We all know that. Lucia supplied him the medicine that extended his life."

Sakura swayed on her feet. "If that is true," she breathed, "it changes everything!"

Naruto was thinking rapidly.

"Should we be sure?" Ibiki asked, raising an eyebrow. "I am as certain as I can be, but it's still a lot of guesswork. I would be hesitant to rely on this information without knowing what she's up to. Even assuming it's something Itachi approved of, it may not be something we would approve of. Itachi's alliances were… complicated."

"It would help if we knew what she was after," Naruto conceded. "Maybe we should wait for Kakashi to return, but I don't want Lucia

to get the idea that her motives are all we care about. I trust your judgment, Ibiki. And I think Sasuke should know as soon as possible. He's demonized Lucia unfairly if this is true. Hell, Lucia has demonized herself unfairly. I don't blame either of them for their assumptions, but they both seem to worry that Itachi was pressured into being a sadist. If he wasn't one, they should both be told."

"Together or separately?" Ibiki asked.

"Together," Naruto said.

Sakura nodded. She seemed invigorated. "Right. Otherwise one will be responsible for confronting the other. Better to make that confrontation simultaneous and inevitable. But Naruto, I think this is good news! Sasuke *likes* Lucia's kids. I know he does. He just won't admit it because he thinks Lucia is so awful. He might be more open to accepting them if he knew this. He might even start seeing them as *Itachi's* . They turned out *okay* , didn't they? I mean, if Itachi wasn't abused by Lucia, but was rather *comforted* , however bizarrely…" She folded her hands on her stomach. Her eyes were shining with hope. "It would mean so much to him."

Naruto looked at Sakura, struck by a funny feeling.

"Sakura," Ibiki warned. "Sasuke is *very* stubborn. This information might be shock to him. He is used to thinking of his brother in a certain way. And has become used to thinking of Lucia in a certain way as well."

"I know," she said quickly. A little too quickly. "But it will help. You know…?" She trailed off. Her hands dropped to her sides, swinging without purpose. She cleared her throat and reached up to nervously push a lock of hair behind her ear. "It will help."

Naruto stared at her, frowning, retracing his thoughts, trying to note what he had seen that seemed funny. What had he noticed? The hitch in her voice? The sparkle in her eye? She seemed entirely

distracted, but happy, like she was filled with bubbles and about to pop. Her hands…

The intuition leapt to him from nowhere.

He waited until business had concluded with Ibiki and they were alone again. Sakura seemed to have an extra bounce to her step. She smiled into thin air. She really seemed to be glowing. Why hadn't he noticed before?

They read the letter to the Feudal Lords one more time. Naruto waited until the ink was sanded and dry, the paper folded, stuffed into an envelope and sealed with the wax emblem of the Hokage. He waited until there was nothing else to do. He waited until Sakura was getting ready to leave.

"Sakura," he said.

She had one hand on the door.

"Are you pregnant?"

TBC

Next chapter: SasuSaku confrontation? (I had to cut it from this one because it was getting too long. Sorry)

Author's Notes:

There's a lot going on in this chapter. Any comments on the following would be very appreciated!

-SasuSaku relationship

-Itachi's unexpected success

-Sachio's characterization and confrontation with Lucia

-Lucia gaming and then getting gamed

-The revelation of the details of Lucia's relationship with Itachi

-Ibiki's analysis of Itachi

-Sakura's pregnancy occurring to Naruto

Thank Yous to reviewers of last chapter!

Mirette (not a bother at all! I love hearing specific passages that people like. I worry them quite a lot so tat is a huge compliment. Thank you very much!), Kurtulmak (wow! What a review. I'm glad it won you over, and I'm so pleased my fic was linked to from TV Tropes. Thank you!), T0FU (yaaaaaay! A GW reader. I have another one of those in the wings once I upload this. So glad you chanced to cross over!), Darth Malleus (perfect! Exactly what I was going for! Thank you), Roguefan212000 (sorry it took so long to update! I hope the updates are quicker to come!), dundee998 (Wow! Thanks for reviewing every chapter! I really appreciate it), hardblackbubble (you reviewed chapter 10, not 14, but thanks anyway!), bluetopaz83 (I LOOOOOOOOOVE your reviews. So happy you continue to return and hope you do again. Thank you soooo much), disneytiger (hope you enjoyed the SasuSaku. There's a bigger drama scene next chapter. Please return!), opheliaetta/Chena Pan (…wow. Awesome review! Possibly the best of the bunch. I can't describe how helpful your comments are. Thank you thank you thank you!), Seynee (this was one of the best reviews and I am so thankful for your thoughts. Thank you very much. Hope you review again), the TumTum Tree (thank you very much! I hope you keep reviewing), Narutard (hey! You're still reading. Please continue to let me know your thoughts), Ekun-Asha (sorry you were delirious last review! Hope you are more awake this time), chlorampattycol (oh! Thank you very much! I hope you continue reading), pink-strawberries (fabulous commentary! That's close to what I was going for), hymnia (your reviews are AMAZING. Very helpful. And the crits are valid), Zankaru Zelladonii (wonderful! I love referrals. Thank you so much for reviewing!), ijpowers92 (thank you so much! Look forward to your comments after this chapter since a lot of your questions last review are answered), Nitramy (can't wait for your comments on Itachi this

chapter if you choose to review again), Cheetay (thank you!), Blade Redwind (your reviews are amazing. Thank you so so so much for your thoughts. It is so worth writing a story like this for readers like you), giodan (thank you very much! I wish I had more time for reading other fics), InARealPickle (I'm glad you were bored and screened out Sasuke too! Thanks for reviewing every chapter! I really appreciate it!), Reignashii (fantastic comments; spot on for the most part), geckohawaii (wow! You are reviewing every chapter. Awesome. Thanks so much!), Kajihenge Yoko (hope you come back to review!), Rin-elwin (so pleased! Thank you very much), AnimePrincessAkina (thank you very much!), First Weaver (thank yoU1 your review was particularly helpful. The purpose of the interrogation should be answered in this chapter…I think? And no, Lucia does not have Uchiha ancestors), bibsa1 (yay! You reviewed again! Thank you very much!), (I was ecstatic to get your review! WOW! Thanks so much), Delbi18 (thank you very much. I think that viewpoint is very important as you are absolutely right and it could go very wrong!), anon (great summary! Perfect), (thanks for your viewpoints! That IS the conflict), shkh4ever (thank you! It's going to stay Sasusaku as that is the main canon relationship, but I understand why you think it is not really about them) , Azwraith (those are some very nice comments! Thank you very much. I'll keep working), Crimson Marionette (glad to see you! Thanks for the comments), Derrand59 (thanks! It is pretty complex. Partly why it takes so long to update), izzybell117 (thank you! There were will be even more sasusaku next chap), Lucathia Rykatu (thanks!), Dionysos (sorry there was no Sasuke in the last chapter—there was some here and will be more in the next), Satoshii (thanks for review! Sadly, love has not worked out…yet)

Chapter 16

Sorry it has been so long! I feel like I've been working on this constantly and just couldn't finish it. Then I always think there is something I forgot or a mistake I made or paragraphs that are bad or that it can be better (it always can be better, but I have to stop eventually). It is over 30 pages in Word so… that is part of it.

This chapter is a lot of character development and confrontation. I hope you like it!

Warnings: Swearing?

White Rain

Chapter 16

By Zapenstap

Sakura's hand fell off the door handle. She turned around slowly and looked Naruto straight in the eye. He half expected her to yell and tell him he was an idiot. But she didn't. She didn't say anything.

That was confirmation enough for Naruto. He leapt to his feet, grinning ear to ear, and grabbed her by the shoulders. "How long?" he asked excitedly.

She looked startled by his enthusiasm, her face cracking halfway toward a smile. "N…not long. A few weeks? I don't know exactly."

He brazenly eyed her figure. She still had a stomach as flat as a board. "It doesn't show at all."

"Of course it doesn't show!" she said, and crossed her arms. "It's too early. How did you know, anyway?"

Naruto pressed his knuckle to his lips, making a show of thinking. Let's see," he said. "Well, you've been pretty emotional lately, and just now you said something about Lucia's kids and Sasuke's family and you put your hands on your abdomen like this…" He mimicked her.

Sakura flushed and looked away. "I didn't realize I did that."

He chuckled. "Hey, don't sweat it! You probably wanted to wait until you're past the difficult stage, right? People do that, don't they? I won't spread it around." He put his hands behind his head, musing on the thought of his best friends having children. "I suppose Sasuke's not wild about it? He hasn't said anything to me."

A shadow came over Sakura's face.

Naruto felt a chill pierce him deep, straight to the heart. He lowered his hands. "Sakura," he said. "Don't tell me you haven't told him."

Tears blossomed in her eyes. "He doesn't know," she whispered. "Don't tell him, Naruto! Promise me you won't!"

Naruto gaped. "Sakura, you can't make me keep a secret like this from Sasuke!"

"You can't tell him, Naruto! As my friend, please-"

"I'm Sasuke's friend too!"

She closed her mouth.

Naruto's face felt stony. He tried to soften it. " *You* have to tell him."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I know. I know. I will. I just… give me time. At least wait until after the match. He's dealing with so much-"

"Sakura, he will be pissed if I know something like this and keep it from him even for a day! Why haven't you told him?"

"Because it was an accident!" she cried. "I don't know how it happened! I took precautions. I must have slipped up somehow. I don't know how. It just *happened* . Naruto, he will be furious. Sasuke doesn't want kids."

"Sure he does. He's just being stubborn. Sasuke's wanted to rebuild his clan since we were Genin. He *needs* a family. If you tell him, he'll be happy."

Sakura shook her head violently, her green eyes wide and wet. "No, Naurto. We've fought about it. More than once. He doesn't think the Uchiha line should be continued. He thinks it's cursed."

"That's crazy…"

Her eyes begged him to believe it. Naruto could see clearly that she was in earnest.

Naruto squeezed the bridge of his nose, thinking deeply. This was supposed to have been a good day. So much had gone *right* today. He was taking action on the situation with the feudal lords. Lucia had confided in Ibiki. Itachi Uchiha was no longer considered a sadist. Sakura was pregnant. It was cause for celebration.

But Sakura looked anything but happy. She seemed terrified, and he wasn't used to seeing that from her.

"Listen," he said, taking her hands in his. Her fingers were cold. He looked straight into her eyes—wet and green like the water of a lagoon. "Sasuke loves you, Sakura. He does. And you love him. What you have gone through for each other is a testament to that. Look, Sasuke *is* going to be scared when you tell him he's going to have a kid, but he *will* get over it. He'll come around. You have to trust me on this one. He will be happy. Eventually."

She shook her head. "Naruto, I don't believe he will."

He put his hands around her face to stop the wagging of her head and looked into her eyes. "Believe."

"Naruto-"

" Sakura, he *will* , but either way, you *have* to tell him. The longer you wait, the harder it is going to be."

He could see in her face that she knew he was right. "All right," she whispered. "I know. I know I have to tell him. And I know I can't ask you to keep it from him. I just…" She bit her lip. "I wish you hadn't realized."

"Sakura…"

"I know! I…I'll tell him today."

Amaya looked everywhere for Haro. First, she tried his house, but he wasn't there. Two of his brothers were home, but they didn't know where Haro had gone. They didn't say anything, but by their expressions, Amaya could tell that they were wondering why she wasn't with him.

She thanked them and left, heading directly to the training ground where Team Four met every morning to train, where she had gone to meet Haro this morning, but it was as empty as she had left it an hour ago.

Amaya stood for awhile in the grass. She hadn't really expected Haro to come back here. Not after what she had told him about last night. She bit her lip, thinking about it.

" *Itachi's* mother *is making him stay home?"*

" *It's got to do with me."*

" *With you? What did you do?"*

" *I… went to his house last night. His mother wasn't home. We … I got in trouble."*

She wasn't able to look Haro in the face. But she had felt his tension. She had had to explain.

" *I kissed Itachi. And…I don't know. I was upset. Really upset. I wasn't thinking. We were kissing and…"*

Haro had looked like he swallowed rocks.

She had started babbling, dropping her eyes from his face *. "Well his mother came in, and I had taken off my shirt. I was wearing a sports bra, but it looked…bad. I screamed at her, like a stupid child, and she told my father, and now…"*

She chanced to look up.

In all the years she had known him, she had never seen Haro's face look like that. His lips were clamped shut, but his eyes burned bright.

" *You…."*

He didn't finish. He stopped himself mid-word and abruptly left the clearing, as if that was the only thing he could do.

She knew he was angry. Really angry. Not his usual spouting-temper, but the kind of anger that came from being deeply hurt.

And she knew why.

Her hands felt clammy.

She and Haro had always been together. They had been best friends, spending nearly every day in each other's company, for as far back as Amaya could remember. Growing up next door, and with her father away so often, Amaya spent so much of her time at Haro's house that she was practically part of his family. They shared everything. She knew everything about him.

Gradually, over the last year, Amaya started to notice a change in the way her other classmates treated her. The girls were chilly, making her feel like she had done something to offend them. The boys just looked at her, and whispered, and snickered to each other. She had been showing superior marksmanship at the time, outscoring nearly everyone in her class, so she suspected jealousy. She drew herself up, pretended not to notice, and tried to make herself impervious to judgment. When Haro saw the snickering, he reacted differently, barking taunts at the boys on her behalf, calling them nattering gossips and cowards and making quips about their talent. It had been a bit brusque, but that was Haro, and though she had told him to stop, his loyalty made her smile. Haro was always true to her.

Then, one day, Yukio—who never lacked in boldness—said out loud what the others had been whispering about. It happened in the school yard after class. He sat perched on the stone wall like he did most days, surrounded by the boys who worshipped his talent and the girls who admired his good looks. Somehow, Amaya had come up in his storytelling—or boasting—about his achievements. Amaya was second to Yukio in Academy, first in select categories, and his greatest threat to total dominance, so it wasn't unusual for him to take shots at her. But that day, he repeated what Amaya came to realize later was a floating joke. Unlike the others, he didn't snicker under his breath. He just it said it, loudly and clearly:

" *She'll trip up soon,"* he had said. *"If her breasts get any bigger, the weight will drag her to the ground."*

Haro charged like a bull. He pushed Yukio off the wall. A fight broke out. Haro got thrashed.

She and Haro never talked about it. At first she was so embarrassed that she was relieved by the silence, but when shame passed, she became scared. Haro's behavior around her had changed. They still spent most of their time together, but he looked at her differently, like he didn't recognize her, and refrained from touching her, even when sparring. They didn't go swimming together that summer. He stopped asking her to spend nights at his house.

That was when Itachi came to Konoha.

You didn't want to screw things up with the one you really love. So you preyed on my son.

Amaya wasn't sure Lucia had it quite right, but there was an element of truth to what she had said. Amaya was afraid of pushing Haro even further away. She didn't want to lose him. In comparison, Itachi just seemed…perfect. She knew Itachi found her attractive. He wasn't the only one, but he was pure, from the outside, and he was so *nice* . Since that day in the school yard, she felt pressured to date….someone. It seemed so simple and uncomplicated.

She could admit now that her intentions toward Itachi hadn't been good. She didn't 'prey' on him, but she didn't love him either. She wasn't even sure she liked him 'that' way. She didn't think of his feelings at all. She didn't consider the pressure *he* was under. She had rushed into a decision made for herself, without much thought to the consequences, though it hadn't felt like rushing. She always felt behind, like she was constantly trying to catch up in a race that just kept getting faster. Her body developing early was just one aspect of it. She was always pushing herself to get ahead, in everything, even when she didn't really feel ready.

Yesterday, many things had hit her together at once, crowding other considerations out of her mind. Haro. Itachi. Training. The match. Her future. Her body. But most of all, it was her father leaving. Leaving again. Her father was always leaving. She was racing to the top and he was missing it. All of it. She had had the distinct impression that she was failing. She was losing. Failing at what? Losing what? She didn't know. She just felt like she was going to lose if she didn't act.

So she acted. She just did… something. Impulsively. Suddenly. Stupidly. She went to Itachi's. Somehow, she got it into her head that she should seduce him, almost just to see if she could. It didn't make any sense. She saw that now. She had been thinking only of her own problems, and not about anybody else. It was so unlike her. She had

screwed up everything. Haro hated her. Itachi was forbidden to see her. Her team was disarrayed days before the match. And her father… She didn't know what he thought of her. That was the keenest cut of all.

She didn't know how to fix it. She just knew she had to try.

She didn't find Haro at the spot he had left her, so she didn't linger there. She ran on, looking for him at the next nearest training ground, but he wasn't there either. She found only an empty glen, green grass waving in a light breeze. She tried the next one. She ran the perimeter of Konoha, checking every training ground, occasionally catching other students at work. They gave her funny looks, but she didn't stop to talk. Her heart beat faster with every failure to locate Haro.

She knew all of Haro's secret places, both in and outside the village. She tried them all—the little waterfall on the cliff face, the cave on the east border, the antique shop in the town center that had that funny-looking lamp he liked, and the healer's shop in the hospital annex, of course. She didn't find him anywhere. The healers told her Haro hadn't been in for days.

Sweaty and tired, she walked back into the street and just stood there, thinking furiously.

One other place occurred to her.

She took off, doubling back the way she had come, until she stood on another street, staring in the direction of the Academy. Classes were in session, but above the stone wall that wrapped around the play yard—the very same one where Haro had pushed Yukio—she could see the chains on one of the swings moving.

It was moving so slowly it might have been the wind, but it was moving counter to the breeze she felt on her cheek. She made for it.

Haro hadn't been on a swing in years, but when they were both new to Academy they had gone to the play yard a lot, specifically for the swings. There were two. They were made from strips of thick leather and chains bolted to a wooden scaffold. They were the kind that took a bit of work to get going, but went pretty high if you kicked hard enough. He denied it now, but Haro loved the swings. When they were little, they used to swing nearly every day after lunch.

She reached the wall and walked parallel to it until she came to the gate. It was open. She entered, shutting it behind her.

The play yard hadn't changed. It was pretty large, with open areas for games and target practice and teacher-led exercises. The swings were located in the section for the little kids, with climbing structures and wood chips scattered on the ground to keep children from hurting themselves when they jumped. Amaya remembered the swing set being larger. It looked very small now, especially with Haro sitting on one of the swings, which was made for a child half his size.

He wasn't swinging. He sat askew on the seat, kicking the ground with one toe to keep it moving, one hand wrapped around the chain. The rest of him slumped forward, his broad shoulders rounding so that he looked small for his height and build, though much too big for the playground around him. He stared at the ground where his shoe had knocked the wood chips away, a pensive expression scrunching his features.

"H…Haro?"

He looked up at the sound of her voice, brown eyes glaring at her reproachfully beneath a flop of brown hair. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I've been looking for you," she said.

"You have?"

"Yeah. I've been looking everywhere."

When he didn't object, she approached. Slowly, she took the chain of the second swing in her right hand. She thought about the texture of the metal on her palm, cold and hard and dirty. She thought about nothing else. For several moments, neither of them spoke.

"I'm sorry," she said finally.

His expression didn't change at all. "For what?"

She bit her lip. The way he said it was like tossing a rock into a pond and watching it sink to the bottom. There was no compassion in his question. He wasn't interested in her answer.

"Haro, please. I'm really sorry."

"For *what* ?" he repeated. "What do you have to be sorry to *me* for? I don't care that you got in trouble with Itachi's mom. Do whatever you want."

"It was stupid. And…we've always been friends," she said. "I mean, I've always been closest to you-"

"And now you want to be Itachi's girlfriend. Fine. Whatever."

"Haro, I know you are angry with me—"

"Well, sure. Why did you have to do it *now* ? The match is days away."

"I shouldn't have."

He just shrugged.

Amaya realized she was shaking. "Haro, I… I don't think that's why you are mad at me."

For several moments, he didn't answer. "Why else would I be mad?" he muttered.

"Seconds ago you said that I needn't be sorry and then you said you are mad that I did…what I did…right before the match, so…" She trailed off.

"So?"

"Haro…" She paused, trembling. She knew what she thought. She knew what she wanted to ask him. The words hovered in a puff of air just behind her lips. They were just so hard to get out. "Haro, do *you* …" She was shaking so hard it was difficult to speak. "Do you… *like* me?"

It was obvious what she meant.

His eyes darted from the ground her face and then immediately away, but she caught a glimpse of his eyes in that second. They were full of feeling, so much of it that her heart hammered. He got off the swing. "No," he said, his voice clipping the word to its shortest length. He wouldn't look her in the eye. When he spoke again, his voice was husky. "I mean, like I said, I don't care what you do. Do whatever you want."

Her heart dropped. She got up too. "So you… you *don't* like me then?"

He didn't answer. He still wouldn't look at her.

She licked her lips. "Haro, it's just that things have been different between us since before last summer. And I don't—"

"Nothing is different," he mumbled. He sounded uncomfortable. "We're friends."

"It *is* different!"

"Well, I've been trying not to make it different!" he snapped. He was close to shouting at her, but for some reason that made her feel better. This was Haro. She was relieved to hear him shout. "I've

been *trying* to keep things just the same, okay? I think about it, you know? I don't want you to feel weird. I've really been trying." He looked up then. "It's just that I can't pretend that I don't…" He trailed off, staring at her, and flushed deep red. He turned his back to her abruptly.

"Don't what?"

"Nothing. Forget about it."

"Haro, it's *okay* !"

"No, it's not. It's really not. It's awful. At least it's… well, it's weird. Sometimes I hate myself. But I can't help it. It's just…" He turned around. His voice relaxed. "Amaya, you are *so* beautiful."

She couldn't speak.

"Come on," he said, flushing to an even deeper red at her silence. "You… you know you are."

"You think I'm beautiful?" she said.

"Everyone does."

"But you do?"

"Well… yeah." He dropped his eyes. "Look, I don't have to tell you. You know already. But you like Itachi, right? You want to be with him, so it doesn't matter what I-"

"I don't know," she interrupted. She felt dazed. The air around her seemed fuzzy and bright, like sunshine seen through water. The air in her throat felt constricted.

"You mean his mom won't allow it?"

"No. I mean I don't know. I don't know anything. I don't know if I really like Itachi. I don't know why I went over there. I don't know

what I want. I don't know anything about that. But you…you mean a lot to me. That's what I'm trying to tell you. That's why I'm sorry."

He looked at her in a different way then, a quizzical expression replacing anger. "Oh."

There was a pause while he seemed to be thinking about what she said.

"You don't know?" he repeated, as if checking to see that he had heard right, "about who you want to be your boyfriend? You haven't decided?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't think I should have one. I mean, I don't think it's the best thing for me… right now."

His expression cleared. The whole mood of him changed with it. He smiled, eyes bright, and even bounced a little on his toes. He sat back on the swing. "Well," he said. "Okay then."

She sat on the second swing next to him. "So…are we still friends?"

He smiled at her. "Of course."

"Please don't be mad at Itachi. It was my fault."

"I'm not mad at anyone."

"Well, that's good, because we have to convince his mom to let us keep training."

"Right."

He seemed distracted. She wasn't sure he heard her.

"She invited us to dinner," she continued. "Itachi's mom invited you, and me, and my father."

Haro looked startled. "I thought you said she was mad at you."

"She is, but she talked to my father and that was what she said she wanted. Can you go?"

"I… Sure."

"Good. I want you to be there. We have to convince her that we are a good team. Will you help me?"

"Yeah."

"And I…I'll have to talk to Itachi alone. That's okay with you? I have to tell him I'm sorry."

"Sure. I mean, yeah. I mean, right." Haro kicked at the ground again, swinging a little. He looked utterly confused, as if he was just catching up to what she was saying. "What kind of dinner is it?"

Amaya shrugged.

He looked a little panicked. "Am I supposed to dress up?"

It was late afternoon when Sasuke let Itachi stop. They had been at it almost four hours. The light of day was just starting to fade, the shadows lengthening across the training ground.

Itachi breathed hard, gasping for air, his lungs burning. His muscles felt like jelly, but the weights on his arms and legs almost felt like part of him now. With shaking hands, he started to take them off, but Sasuke stopped him with a click of his tongue.

"Wear them home," he said. "Wear them all the time, even to bed."

Itachi froze. "Are you serious?"

Sasuke just looked at him, black eyes like pools of dark water, reflecting his own incredulous expression back at him and revealing nothing else.

Itachi left the weights where they were, wrapped tight around his wrists and ankles, making it harder to lift his arms and legs. He wanted to take them off. He was exhausted. And sore. But he couldn't afford to disappoint Sasuke, not when things just seemed to be improving.

Sasuke had smiled at him today. *Smiled* . At least, Itachi thought it was a smile. Some of his remarks had even sounded…approving. Itachi's heart lifted with each utterance that sounded more like coaching and less like a rebuke, and doubled his efforts. He repeated the obstacle course so many times he knew he would dream about it tonight. When Sasuke was satisfied with his time using the weights, they sparred again. Sasuke tested his balance, reflexes, and execution of jutsu, all with the weights. He continued to knock Itachi down when he wavered, but seemed to thrash him less than he had in days past. Itachi didn't know if that was a sign that he was improving or if his uncle was being less violent with him. Either way he was glad.

As he gathered his things, he chanced a question.

"Sasuke, if I get fast enough, will you teach me Chidori?"

Sasuke glanced at him sideways.

"I know. I know," Itachi said hastily, holding up both hands. "You've told me I can't use it. I understand. I don't think there'd be time before the match anyway. I just want to learn it."

Sasuke didn't respond. His expression revealed nothing.

Itachi wasn't sure whether to feel hopeful or discouraged. Sasuke's moods were difficult to unravel. Like his mother, he was like a brick wall, locking everything in, but beneath that, Itachi had the impression that Sasuke was a lot like his sister, whose emotional feeling was very deep. He never knew whether the mood was going to be yellow or blue. It could shift in a second. He had to stay on his toes.

Afraid that Sasuke would respond with refusal if he let him think about it too long, he quickly blurted out, "Same time tomorrow?"

Sasuke nodded.

They parted without any further conversation.

Itachi headed home at a trot. He tried not to think too much about the training, careful not to get his hopes up, but he was excited. He had done well on the obstacle course. He had *surprised* Sasuke. And his uncle had been pleased enough to smile…or smirk…or whatever that was. Itachi wasn't sure he should let himself feel proud, afraid he might jinx his progress, but he grinned as he pelted home.

He was excelling at something for once. Maybe it wasn't such a surprise. He was getting better at everything, and Itachi had always been pretty good at obstacle courses. Tromping through the woods, climbing rocks and trees and crossing rivers with Rina had been how he spent most of his free time back home. He thought back to those days with a vague sense of disorientation. It seemed so long ago, like another life almost. Did he really used to do that kind of thing in his prep school clothes? It would feel unnatural to wear something like that now….at least to train.

He wondered if he had made any progress against Yukio. Surely he wouldn't be completely thrashed…but did he stand any chance at winning? It was probably unlikely. Yukio was best in year at everything and he would be training too. But Itachi was fast. He had started out fast. With the weight training, maybe he would be faster than Yukio. That was worth something.

He pushed himself to run, even though he was tired, even with the weights, and arrived home on shaky legs, out of breath but excited. He opened the front door and stopped, confused.

His mother was in the kitchen…cooking. His mother didn't really cook, but there she was, slicing vegetables over a cutting board. There were strips of beef frying in a skillet over the stove.

He closed the door quietly.

Rina was unpacking boxes on the counter. He watched as she unpacked a set of dishes and started setting places—eight places. Itachi counted twice just to be sure. Then he did a double take. That wasn't the table he ate breakfast at this morning. The table he remembered would have been too small to seat so many. His mother had bought a new table? It looked expensive. There was a fruit basket in the center of it.

Itachi loitered in the doorway without speaking. In silence, he watched his mother carry the small cutting board to the stove and scrape chopped onions, peppers, and leeks into the frying pan with the back of a knife.

Something more than the food and the furniture was strange. It was something about his mother—a lightness in her step, a softening of her expression. She seemed… happier than he remembered.

"What's going on?"

His mother turned to him. "Itachi. I didn't hear you come in. You'd better get cleaned up."

Rina glanced up at him, saying nothing. She was wearing her blue dress, a silk ribbon tied in her hair.

"For what?" he asked.

"I'm having a dinner party."

Itachi was puzzled. "You hate dinner parties."

Dinner parties had been common back home, though his mother had never cooked for them herself. He remembered specifically how much she despised them. He had rarely attended, as they were usually for the adults only, but he remembered the preparations.

"I hated the company," his mother said, "not the party, but we will be having good company tonight. Ino and Chouji are coming over, as are your teammates. And Amaya's father."

He stared at her, uncomprehending for a few moments.

"You should get changed," she suggested again. "Your clothes are filthy."

"Sure," he said, and mechanically made for the stairs. On the bottom step, he paused. "What happened today?"

She regarded him with one of her perplexing expressions, like she was thinking two things at once, a split between what she felt and what she wanted him to *think* she felt. "I had a talk with Amaya's father," she answered, "and then with Ibiki."

Itachi jumped a little in his skin. "The head of interrogation?" He had heard of Ibiki in the Academy classes.

"Yes," his mother said. "Don't get excited. We just talked. "

"About what?" he demanded. "Why?"

"The Hokage and Amaya's father both requested it," she said. "It's nothing you should worry about."

Then she smiled, as if amused by the experience, which perplexed Itachi even more.

Usually, he was silent in these manners. He was the child. She was his mother. Though he often wondered, he rarely questioned her moods and never asked her to reveal her secret thoughts. Maybe it was confidence because the day's training had gone well, but tonight he felt the urge to speak. "Mom, why are you smiling?" he asked.

She looked startled.

He just looked at her. "You seem happy," he said.

He watched the changes in her expression, thoughts flickering across her face.

"You *never* seem happy," he added. "What did you talk to Ibiki about?"

Behind him, the sound of dishes being moved around ceased. He could feel Rina listening, her hands still on the plates.

"We talked about your father," she answered. "Itachi Uchiha. I learned something unexpected."

His heart leapt. "Something good?" he asked.

She nodded. Usually, her nods were an indication that she had said all she was going to say.

"What did you learn?" he pushed her.

She regarded him with a slightly surprised, considering expression.

He was surprised too. He had never pressed his mother so much before. He was her son. He respected her. He respected what she chose to confide in him and what she didn't. But he *was* her son and he was loyal. She trusted him more than most, perhaps more than anyone else in her life. It occurred to him that maybe the only reason she didn't confide in him more was because he did not ask. Maybe not asking meant he wasn't ready for the answers. If that was so, then the equilibrium felt different today. His mother didn't frighten him so much. He realized with surprise that she was not much taller than he was. He would soon be taller.

"Mom?" he prompted.

She answered him. "I learned that I may have been in love with your father."

It was his turn to be startled. He didn't say anything.

"I don't know what Ibiki wanted to learn," she said. "That is what I learned."

When his tongue felt loose enough for conversation, he spoke. "Wasn't my father a murderer?" he asked. "Didn't he kill his family?"

She nodded.

"Why did you love him?"

"It was a game," she explained, looking distantly at nothing. "When I saw him, I…acted… as if I loved him, but perhaps I really did."

He regarded her in silence, weighing her mood against his own thoughts.

"Well, I'm glad," he confessed finally.

"Are you?"

"Sure," he said, and then shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. "I mean, I don't know. Whether it's a game or not, I think it's better to love someone than not love someone. Especially someone…"

He trailed off.

She regarded him with a considering expression. " *You* I always loved, Itachi. Always."

"I know," he said, and cleared his throat, which suddenly felt choked. Maybe he wasn't quite as ready for this conversation as he thought. He sought a change in topic. His wandering gaze alighted on the table, where Rina still stood, staring at them both with wide eyes. "You bought a table?"

His mother looked relieved to talk about something else too. "A table is necessary for a dinner party."

"Is there a white silk tablecloth and silver candlesticks?" he asked curiously.

"Why would we need that?"

"Isn't it considered mannerly?"

She smiled at him. "Manners are about making the people around you feel comfortable. It would be out of place here."

"So we'll…?"

"Provide food," she said. "Presentation to company should be gracious, not extravagant. You comprehend the difference?"

He nodded.

"I think you should change," she said. "They'll be here soon."

He nodded.

He washed and changed quickly. His head was so stuffed with thoughts that it was difficult to focus on much more than doing up the buttons of his shirt and fixing his hair. He was staring at himself in the mirror, thinking a great deal about nothing, when he heard voices drifting up from the ground floor. The sounds sent chills coursing through him. Amaya had arrived, with Haro by the sound of it, and then he heard a voice he supposed to be Amaya's father. A minute later, he heard Chouji's boisterous laugh, and his wife's equally loud, enthusiastic response.

He took a deep breath, readying himself to go down, when a knock sounded at his door.

"Come in," he said automatically.

He assumed it would be his mother, or Rina, asking him to come to the table, but it was Amaya who walked into his room.

His entire body stiffened at the sight of her. It was an involuntary response, an instinctive reaction to the memory of the last time he had seen her. Just like before, she was wearing civilian clothes, a skirt and a blouse with a round collar. But her posture was different—less affected. He could see shame in her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak before he could.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Your mother said I could talk to you. I did ask. She said dinner isn't quite ready yet, so I…" She took a deep breath. "Itachi, I'm really sorry. About yesterday."

"It's okay," he said automatically.

"Can I come in?"

"Oh," he said, realizing that she was still in the hall, her hand on the door. "Sure."

She released the handle and entered, but left the door open. He wondered if his mother had asked her to do that. She stayed a reasonable distance from him too, her eyes on his face. "I talked to Haro," she said.

He swallowed.

"It's fine," she said. "He knows everything. He's not mad at you."

"Is he mad at you?" Itachi asked.

"He was, but it…I think it's okay now."

He didn't say anything.

She bit her lip, dropping her eyes from his face. "Your mom said some things to me," Amaya said.

"My mom can be a little harsh, especially when it comes to me."

"No. She was right. It was an awful thing…what I did."

"Don't say that. You're not awful. I like you, Amaya. I-"

"I know," she interrupted. She looked straight into his eyes. "That's why it is awful."

He froze. A chill like ice water spread from his heart to his fingertips. "You…don't like me?"

She looked away. "I think… not quite that way."

He sat down on the edge of his bed, not certain he had made a decision to sit or if legs had just given out. Rejection. It was painful. He hadn't really expected it to be. He wasn't sure what he was feeling.

Amaya was quiet.

"I've liked you since I first saw you," he said defensively. "You're mature and nice and responsible— "

"I'm not," she answered. "I'm not any of those things."

"You were nice to me when I was a stranger here," he said. "You were the only one."

"Not really." She paused. "When you arrived, people were talking about whether you might represent a threat, so I was polite. And you might have had a Sharingan too, so I thought it was better to be nice. And then you were on my team, so of course we had to work together… That's all."

"Oh." He had no idea what to think. There was a cold pit in his stomach. "So you don't even like me as a friend."

Her eyes widened. "What? No, Itachi, I do. I've grown to like you quite a lot. It's just that, at first, I wasn't trying to be nice to you. I was being careful. You didn't grow up here, so-"

"You thought of me as an outsider," he finished for her, "same as Haro. You didn't trust me."

"It's impossible not to think of you as an outsider," she protested. "I was raised here, to think and feel like a Shinobi, since my birth. And you're…well you may have roots in Konoha, but you *were* raised on the outside. It is natural for a Shinobi to question appearances and your coming to Konoha was suspicious. But that was just at first. Itachi, you are a really good person, and a very good Genin. We're teammates now. It doesn't matter what I thought when you first got here."

He saw her point, and he understood it, but for a moment, he allowed himself to feel nettled. All this time, he had been thinking… naively, he supposed… that Amaya was one of the only people to give him a chance since the beginning. In reality, she had been wary of him too. She was just more diplomatic, and perhaps craftier at hiding her fears than most.

"So you let me think you liked me," he said. "Yesterday, did you…do what you did…to get on my good side? Did you want to pry information out of me? Is it the rumors about my mom, or—"

"No," she said, taking a deep breath, "I don't know what I was thinking yesterday. It wasn't a ploy. It wasn't even about you. I knew you liked me, and I was just… I wanted to grow up or something. I thought I could force it. I thought I could be your girlfriend and that would make me better somehow. I don't know how. It was stupid. I'm not ready for a boyfriend. And I could have really hurt you, and Haro, and myself. It was selfish. It was mean. I'm so sorry. I could have ruined our team, and… a lot more."

He believed her. He could see in her face that she was being honest, and that she regretted her actions. He felt better. "You didn't ruin anything," he said. "Nothing happened."

"Can we be friends?" she asked, and he felt her earnestness seep through the question. "Because that's what I want. To be better

friends. Real friends."

Itachi thought about it. "I think we're better friends already."

"You think so?"

"We understand each other better, and we're being honest, so… yeah." He wasn't just being polite. He really meant it.

She looked so relieved. She sat on the edge of his bed, hand tucked close beside her on the mattress. "Itachi, you are *such* a good person. From the bottom of my heart, I believe that, and I am really *really* sorry."

"It's okay," he said, feeling lighter. "I forgive you. It wasn't like it was all that bad, you know? It was a pretty great first kiss. For me anyway."

She looked somewhat embarrassed and somewhat pleased. "Really?"

"Absolutely."

She paused, regarding him with those luminous, warm brown eyes that he had found so attractive. They still were, but the feeling he had when looking into them was dimmer than yesterday. He wondered about that. Did things change so fast? Was he just melancholy from being rejected? He wasn't sure. There was so much about the world he didn't know. But, he realized, there was no rush to know it all.

"For me too," she said. "The kiss, I mean, if you want to know."

He perked up, pleased. "Well… good then."

"So…friends?" she asked.

He nodded.

Amaya smiled. "Do think your mother will let us train?"

"I don't know. I hope so."

"Me too." She took a deep breath. "You were right about her, you know. Your mom is… scary. I don't know what it is exactly. I mean, I know I could best her in a fight, but she's…I don't know. When she talks to me, it's like…" She paused, frustrated at being unable to quite define what it was.

"I know," Itachi said. "I know exactly what you mean. But I think she wants us to win, or at least do well, against Yukio's team. She wouldn't be having you all over for dinner if she didn't."

"Should I ask her if it's okay?"

"I think this dinner is her way of giving you the opportunity. She'll respect you for asking as long as you follow her rules. She just wants the best for me."

"We should go down then," Amaya said. "I don't want her worrying about what is taking so long."

Itachi didn't think his mother was worried, but he agreed it was time to go down.

The dining room was a strange sight. From the stairs, it was even more obvious that the dining table was too big for the little room that served as their common area. It seemed impossible to him that his mother hadn't realized that when she bought it. She must think this dinner party was important, which meant that she knew his training was important. He hoped that was what it meant.

Even stranger to observe was the company. Shinobi, he could tell, were not really accustomed to dinner parties. Ino and Chouji seemed the most comfortable. They sat side by side, discussing village gossip and affairs of their household while picking at the cold cuts and vegetables laid out as appetizers, but Haro, who sat on Chouji's

left, looked like a spooked animal. He sat with his hands in his lap, completely silent, his eyes darting around constantly as if on alert for an attack. He was dressed in civilian clothes like Amaya, wearing a collared shirt and trousers. Amaya's father sat on Haro's left. He wore his Shinobi gear and seemed the most out of place of everyone.

Itachi's mother saw them on the stairs. Amaya paused on the steps, taking a deep breath, and then descended the rest of the way. She sat beside by her father while Itachi took a seat between her and Rina. Across the table, Itachi met Haro's eyes. He tried to communicate through silence that he regretted anything Haro might have suffered from his fallout with Amaya. He noted a touch of uncertainty in Haro's expression, but no animosity. When Itachi nodded to him, Haro nodded return acknowledgement. The awkwardness lifted fractionally.

Ino and Chouji were the only ones carrying on a conversation. Itachi turned his attention to it and interjected where he could, out of habits formed from being drilled social politeness since the cradle, but no one else spoke. Itachi's mother served dinner just as the quiet started to stretch too far. When all the plates were on the table, she herself sat down. Compliments on the food were muttered, and then complete quiet fell.

"Ino," his mother murmured, cracking the silence. "Did I hear you say you needed some help in your flower shop?"

"I could use it," Ino said. "So much of my time is taken up with the baby."

Itachi's mother eyes slid to Amaya.

Itachi was confused, but Amaya seemed to read something in his mother's gaze that he didn't. She jumped a little in her seat. "Ino, can I…can I help you?"

Ino blinked at her. "Do you mean in the shop? Are you looking for a job, Amaya?"

Amaya's eyes flickered to her father, and then to Itachi's mother, as if seeking approval.

"Yes," Amaya said when no word was spoken. "A job in the flower shop would be….great."

"Aren't you kept pretty busy training for the match?" Chouji interjected.

"Not all day," Amaya said. "And afterward, I should have more time, so… If you need an assistant, I'd like to help. I mean, if it's not a bother—"

"Well of course it isn't a bother!" Ino exclaimed. "The help will be very welcome. Sachio, is it okay with you if Amaya helps out in the shop when she isn't training?"

Sachio's eyes were glued on Itachi's mom, as if this were somehow by her design, which Itachi suspected it might be. He nodded slowly to Ino.

Amaya cleared her throat. Her eyes turned to Itachi's mother too."Right. So, if that's settled, for training, I was wondering if…well if Itachi could… tomorrow?" She flushed.

It was strange to hear Amaya suffer from so many pauses and hesitations, especially when he knew she had been planning for this. Ino and Chouji exchanged puzzled glances. They didn't know that Itachi's training with his team had been suspended. Itachi thought about saying something to rescue Amaya, but then thought better of it; his interference would weaken the effort she was making.

Itachi's mother said nothing.

Amaya drew herself up straighter. "What I mean is…" She cleared her throat. Her voice gained confidence. "Look. We have a strong team. Itachi's training with Sasuke is paying off, but we need to practice together more. We need to strategize. The next few days are really important."

"Isn't Sakura helping you?" Ino interjected.

"Yes," Amaya said. "Well, sometimes."

"She's been kind of distracted lately," Haro said. "She's been helping me with healing techniques, though, and she goes to Itachi's trainings with Sasuke every day."

"She should be guiding you," Chouji said. "Is Sakura still sick, Ino? You told me she wasn't feeling well, but I didn't know it was interfering with her training. If she can't teach, she should get them a substitute."

Itachi frowned. He didn't realize Sakura had been feeling ill. She seemed fine when he saw her.

Ino's eyebrows were drawn low in an expression of consternation. "I'll talk to her," she said.

Amaya was still watching Itachi's mother. "May we train?"

Itachi held his breath.

Several moments passed.

"You must be committed," his mother said finally.

"I am," Amaya said fiercely. She looked at Haro.

"So am I," Haro said. "Believe me. I want nothing more than to clock Yukio in front of a crowd."

Itachi merely nodded.

His mother smiled. "Then I wouldn't keep you from it."

Itachi, Amaya, and Haro all let out breaths at the same time.

"What is all this about, Lucia?" Ino asked curiously. "Was Itachi injured training or something?"

"He is unharmed," Itachi's mother told her. "We've had some… disagreements…is all, but it is very important to me that Itachi does well in this match. I want him to impress. I want all of you to impress," she added, including Amaya and Haro with a nod, "but my son most of all."

"Why?" Sachio asked. His interruption was surprising, startling them all, as he had been silent until now. "I understand that you don't want him to be hurt or humiliated, but why is it important to you that the boy does so well? What do you think it will get you?"

Ino and Chouji wore conspicuously serious and unreadable faces.

"I want Itachi recognized as a part of this village," his mother responded. "Not just by the Hokage's consent, but universally. I have wished this since long before we arrived in this country."

Everyone responded to this differently. Itachi flushed. Amaya looked puzzled. Haro stared. Amaya's father grunted. Ino and Chouji looked surprised. Rina picked at her plate, not seeming to be listening.

His mother continued. "I need Itachi to be accepted here in a way I never can be. He needs the endorsement of Konoha's Shinobi if that is to happen. His teammates' support in this match will help, but not if he fails to impress. I need the Jounin to respect him. My word will get him only so far."

"Your word will get him nothing," Sachio said. His tone was sharp. "Your son is the bastard child of a rogue Shinobi with a very bloody history in this village. You are an adulterous outsider whose motives are unknown. And you are known to lie. You cannot expect the

Jounin of this village to accept your son just because he trains here, not even if our children do, not even if he does well in this fight."

Amaya looked horrified, both hands pressed to her mouth. Itachi was shocked, not so much at what was said—the rudeness didn't escape him, but he had been called worse than a bastard—but because Sachio was such a reserved personality.

His mother did not look fazed. "I appreciate that you are willing to voice aloud what others are thinking, Sachio," she said. "You are a captain of those whose trust I covet. Do *you* hold ill will against me?"

Amaya looked like she had swallowed a plum whole.

"No," Sachio said, this time in a quiet voice. "I don't trust you, but I don't hold any ill will. I am not plotting against you. You've proven yourself cooperative. I've entrusted you to the Hokage."

His mother nodded. Her eyes traveled around the table. "I want it known that I allowed myself to be interrogated by Ibiki," she said.

Chouji gasped. Ino's eyes widened.

"It was a discussion without instruments," his mother explained. "I was asked about my history with Itachi Uchiha. I answered honestly and completely. It was my own choice to submit myself. Force was not used. The Hokage has not yet revealed to me whether the conversation was enlightening to him, but I trust that if any confidence comes of it, all the Jounin will be informed."

She was silent for a moment after this. Itachi didn't say anything for her. He could tell by her expression that she wasn't ready to announce to everyone what she had confided in him just before dinner—that she may have loved Itachi Uchiha, regardless of who or what he had been. Whatever her feelings were, they were very complicated and personal to her. He didn't think she was ready to share her secrets.

So he wasn't prepared for what she said next.

Her eyes lifted slowly, dark and glittering, framed by black lashes in a pale face. "I want something known."

No one interrupted. Itachi scarcely breathed.

His mother's tone was low, but strong. "I won't deny the rumors about me. The very worst you have heard is probably true. But know that I am in earnest when I say I want my son to be accepted here. I want to declare to you, even if my word is worth nothing, that I am wholly committed to my son's future in this village. I mean to do Konoha no harm."

Silence followed her words. Itachi wasn't sure what to think or say.

"If there is anything you can say to the Jounin that will help," his mother added, looking Sachio, Ino, and Chouji in the eye, each in turn. "I will be grateful."

Ino and Chouji exchanged glances.

"Lucia," Ino said. "I might be alone here in saying this, but this is unnecessarily formal. I like you already. You've been so helpful to me with the baby. I will tell the other Jounin whatever you think will help. All you have to do is ask. Chouji has heard me compliment you before. Haven't you, Chouji?"

"It's true," Chouji said. "She has. She wasn't very popular for it, but Ino has never much cared what other people think."

Itachi smiled to hear this, but his mother's expression said that she did not believe Ino. "That is kind of you to say, but I know that you were set to watch me from the day I arrived in the village."

Ino blinked. "Well, sure, but—"

"I don't take offense," his mother interjected quickly.

Ino's forehead just creased in confusion.

Chouji grunted. "Naruto did ask us to keep an eye on you, but that's kind of Ino's point, Lucia. We've seen more of you than the others and we're saying that we quite like you. Neither of us has seen you do or say anything that supports the fuss being made about you in the ranks. The mutterings seem a bit…hysterical…to us."

"I really don't know what harm you *could* do to Konoha," Ino added. "I really don't. Lucia, I think maybe you underestimate what Shinobi can do. If you don't mean any harm, then you needn't worry about the rest of it. You should trust *us* a little bit more."

Itachi's mother seemed as baffled by this response as Ino had been by hers.

Ino leaned across the table. "If you did intend to do Konoha harm, what of it? We can take care of ourselves." She reached for the broccoli florets, munching on them as she talked. "I mean, for example, I can read minds."

His mother's eyes widened. She was silent, as was typical for her, but Itachi felt a difference. Her vulnerability leapt out at him from across the table. Her lips parted, but no words emerged. He felt a sudden urge to rush to her protection, though he didn't know from what.

"Ino!" Sachio said sharply. "You mustn't entrust Shinobi secrets—!"

Ino cut him off with a wave of her hand. "Oh, calm down, Sachio. It's hardly a big secret. You could ask any Shinobi from here to the Land of Earth what the Yamanaka clan is famous for and they would *all* tell you mind reading. Lucia's an outsider, so she probably hasn't heard, but what's the big deal in her knowing? It's not like knowing would tell her *how* it's done, which is the main secret, since it's a rare ability. It just makes no sense to me. Everyone acts like it's imperative we *all* know every detail of all Lucia's dirty, highly *personal* history, but she can't know a thing like that? Come on. Trust

goes both ways." She looked significantly at Lucia. "Don't worry. I haven't read your mind," she said. "I'm just saying that I *could* ."

"That's… I didn't know that," Itachi's mother admitted. "That does change my perspective."

Ino shrugged. "Well, now you know. Don't be concerned. I don't want to read your mind. And I don't intend to." Abruptly, she laughed. Her laugh was unconscious and light. It cracked the tension right out of the air. "Although, I'll admit that I am *deadly* curious about what you've got in your head…especially about Sasuke's brother!"

"Ino, you're a terrible gossip," Chouji said in a loud whisper everyone could hear. "You shouldn't mention a thing like that, especially at dinner!"

Ino flushed at this, her pale cheeks turning a rosy shade of pink. She guiltily pulled the florets apart, popping each piece individually into her mouth. "Okay, I am. I admit it. And I have a loud mouth too! It's just that I've heard a ton about him from Sakura, but that comes from Sasuke, so you know, another perspective might be interesting. You don't have to say a word, Lucia! I won't judge you. I'm just saying that if you *wanted* , we could talk over tea, about anything you want." She chewed on her broccoli, looking thoughtful. "I mean, I'd like to be your friend."

Itachi could sense his mother's feelings. She looked as composed as ever, but he could *feel* her. She was overwhelmed. She couldn't respond. She didn't know what to think. He didn't think she had ever been made a candid or sincere offer of friendship.

He spoke for her. "That's nice of you, Ino," he said. "My mother loves tea."

Ino's head swiveled to him. "You are *so* sweet! I hope my boy grows up to be half as sweet as you." She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Gah! He'll probably be a little monster."

Itachi flushed. Chouji beamed.

"You kids should sleep," Ino exclaimed. She leaned back in her hair. "You're getting up early to train, right?" She looked Itachi's team over with a twinkle in her eye. "Lucia, if we're going to be friends I demand to know what the drama was there! I don't believe it was just a disagreement. It's going to bother me all night. If you don't tell me, I'll get it out of Amaya. She's set to be captive in my flower shop now!"

Itachi flushed even deeper. A glance at Amaya told him she was pink too. Sachio looked scandalized beyond speech. He was staring at Ino as if she was a creature he didn't recognize.

"I think," his mother said, eyeing Amaya and Itachi as she spoke, softly and slowly, "that some things are best kept private."

"Well, all right," Ino said. "We should get some sleep too actually." She hid a yawn with a fist. "The Grass Ninja are supposed to arrive tomorrow too. And the Feudal Lords. Ugh. I almost forgot."

Itachi's mother glanced at Ino sharply. "The Feudal Lords? Coming here?"

"Yep," Ino said. "Chouji's set to be on patrol. I don't know why the Feudal Lords are coming. Naruto's hatching something. He invited them to the match, but there's some village business reason behind it."

"I see," his mother said. Her tone was cool, mild, almost *too* disinterested.

Itachi wondered what she was planning.

The moon hung as a thin sickle in the sky, illuminating the training ground with a tepid light.

Sasuke sat on the top of the climbing rock, surveying the rest of the course spread out before him. He wasn't sure how long he had been sitting there exactly, but it was a long time. He should have been cold, but he didn't really feel the air around him. He was focused more on what he felt internally.

He felt sick. He felt ill. It wasn't a fever or a wound. It was a sensation of unease. Malaise. Something off balance. Something was not right. It wasn't in any particular part of his body he could identify.

Training the kid had gone well. Really well. The kid was fast. He was agile. And he was smart. Each day he came prepared, he worked hard, he exhausted himself, took all of Sasuke's abuse, and kept coming back. He wasn't just getting better. He was getting good. For a Genin. But that was enough. The more Sasuke thought about it, the sicker he felt. Did the boy stand a chance in the match? Had Sasuke taught him *too* much? He shouldn't be here. A kid from the outside shouldn't be a Shinobi. He should be something else. He should be somewhere else.

But what and where was he supposed to be?

Sasuke tried to think what his brother would have wanted. Train the kid? Send him away? There were no answers there. Itachi was dead. And all of Sasuke's feelings and memories were buried with him deep in the earth, beyond recall.

But if that were really true, why did he keep remembering things? Old things. For hours now, little memories—impressions really—kept springing up in his mind, hazy images from way before, when Sasuke was only a kid, when Itachi was young, before his brother was in ANBU, before Sasuke was in Academy. They were such little thoughts, like sprouts out of the ground.

They paralyzed him. He couldn't move. He kept digging for more, searching for sounds, words, memories of Itachi's voice. All he

remembered was silence. What would his brother have thought? What would he have said about this kid?

The answer eluded him.

Perhaps it didn't matter. The training was almost over. There was what…two days left before the match? Three? Sasuke would soon be free of the boy. His duty to Naruto would be discharged. That was the only reason he was doing this. The kid would fight, and win or lose, that would be the end of it. After the match, Sasuke would… what?

That answer also eluded him.

At length, he remembered himself, remembered where he was and how long he had been there. He had to go home eventually.

He returned in the dark, a shadow within the shadows, a piece of darkness cut out of the night. His footsteps made no sound. Before him, he could see the house that he and Sakura called home, yellow light seeping out beneath the door frame and between the curtains in the windows. He wasn't eager for light. As he stepped onto the porch, he avoided the boards that creaked, making no sound. When he opened the door, all was quiet.

Sakura was awake. She was lying on the sofa, feet on the floor, her cheek pressed into the fabric of the armrest, but she was awake. Her eyes were open, staring at him as he shut the door behind him. The lamp on the table was burning. It was the only source of light.

"Where were you?" she asked, sitting up. "I was worried. I've been waiting."

"I was on the training ground."

"With Itachi?"

"No. He went home hours ago."

She didn't reply.

He sensed a quietness in her that seemed unusual. "Why were you waiting?"

She got up from the sofa. "I have something to tell you."

Sasuke was wary. She was smiling, but her smile seemed wan.

"What is it?" he asked.

She didn't speak immediately. She seemed to be wrestling with words. "I saw Naruto today."

"I know," he said.

"Yes. Well, it's been quite a long day. First, Lucia came in. To see Ibiki."

He was startled. "Did you learn something?"

"Oh. Um." She looked away. "Naruto said he'd brief you about it. That's not what I was going to say."

Naruto would brief him? Sasuke wasn't sure if that was good news or bad. Apparently, it was important enough that it required a formal brief.

Sakura looked around. She looked at the lamp, at the couch, at the door, at the kitchen. She looked everywhere but at him. "Are you hungry?"

"No."

She stepped close to him. Her arms looped around his waist. She laid her head against his chest. "We can talk later," she said. "If you're not too tired…"

He pushed her away.

"Sasuke!" she gasped. She looked stricken.

"What is wrong with you?" he demanded.

She looked confused, and hurt, and frightened. "What do you mean? Nothing is wrong with me." She stepped close to him again. "I just love you. I—"

He fended her off. "You're acting strangely. You've *been* acting strangely. You want me *all* the time. You've never wanted me this much, not even when we first—"

He cut off, biting on the words. She blushed furiously.

"Do you hate it?" she asked, her voice tremulous, incredulous, eyes shining. "I'm sorry. I thought-"

"Of course I don't *hate* it," he seethed. "I just think it is weird. You're up and then you're down. You're giving me the cold shoulder one minute and seducing me the next. Lately, it just seems like all we do is have sex!"

"Because you won't talk to me!"

He didn't like that. He didn't want to hear that. "We talk *every day* . I just asked you what you wanted to say!"

"No. Sasuke, we have conversations, but you don't *talk* to me. You don't tell *me* anything."

"What don't I tell you?"

"I don't know! Whatever it is you are thinking!"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Well, you don't tell me anything about Itachi."

"He's your student. You're at every training session. What is there to tell?"

"A lot! But that's not the Itachi, I meant!"

Sasuke closed his mouth.

"It's hard to talk to you," she said. Her tone was accusatory, but controlled. There were unshed tears in her eyes. "You shut me out. You always have! I understand why. I know it is hard. I don't want to press you, but there are so many forbidden topics! I feel like all I do is worry about you and wonder what you are thinking. My feelings always seem less important. You are so distant."

The desperation in her voice unnerved him. "Are you saying that we have to have sex before you can talk to me?"

"I want to be close to you! Don't you understand?"

He understood, but he was confused.

There were tears in her eyes. "Sasuke, it just feels so strained, like you are always on the verge of leaving. And I just…I want you. I want to keep you, so I…."

"So you…what?"

She didn't answer.

A thought sparked in his mind. "Are you trying to get pregnant? To trap me?"

Her face drained of color. "What? Sasuke, no. That wasn't what I— I swear. I—"

But Sasuke saw it. She was fumbling for words. She looked to the corner when she spoke. She didn't meet his gaze. He could see the emotions plain on her face. Sakura had never been good at

concealing her feelings. There was definitely something in her expression. Guilt. He was sure of it.

She was lying.

Fury exploded in him like a storm. "You know I don't want children! We *talked* about this, Sakura. We've *fought* about it. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Tears leaked from her eyes. She started shaking. "Sasuke, please —"

"No!" he snapped. He turned his back on her and strode from the room. "I don't want to talk about this."

She followed. Her hand fell on his shoulder—a gentle, trembling touch. He turned, wrenching his arm out of her grip. He faced her. Tears streamed from her eyes, but her expression was one of shock. Or terror.

"You said…" She licked her lips. "You said before that you didn't *know* !" she implored him. "You said you worried that your children would be cursed, but you have to know that isn't true! You never that you *definitely* didn't want—"

"Well, I'm telling you now! I definitely don't want children!"

He was shouting at her. He could hear himself…see himself…as if from a distance. He didn't like what he saw. He didn't want to shout. He didn't want to hurt her. But he couldn't help it. All the fears he had been compressing and compressing came boiling out of him.

She wilted before his gaze.

He spoke forcefully. "A child is the *last* thing I want. Haven't you seen me with those kids? I can barely hold myself together."

Sakura was shaking like a leaf.

With an effort, he seized control of his temper and lowered his voice. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't shout. I just—I don't want children, okay? Tell me you understand."

He reached for her.

She pulled back. She didn't meet his eyes.

"Sakura?" he asked.

She just shook her head. He understood her body language. She didn't want his embrace. She didn't want him to touch her.

He knew what he had to do. "I was afraid of this," he said. He had been afraid for some time. It had been coming for awhile now. He couldn't pretend he hadn't seen it coming. "We can't run from this forever. You want kids. I don't."

"Don't say that," she sobbed. "Sasuke, I beg of you, don't say that! That's not what I want you to say right now."

He could hear her starting to cry. He steeled himself.

"But you do," he said. "And I shouldn't have told you I didn't." He didn't know how to justify it. He didn't know what to say. "I didn't want to lose you. Sakura, I love you, but I don't want children. Rebuilding my clan would be a mistake. I know you were hoping I would change my mind. I was hoping you would be satisfied with how things are. But if you want kids, then we can't—"

"Stop," she begged, tears coating her voice with such thickness that he could barely make out the word.

"—be together," he finished.

She collapsed on the floor.

He felt awful. "Sakura…"

"Don't!"

"I don't want a family."

She wept. But it wasn't all sadness. He could feel anger in her.

He knelt beside her, gathered her in his arms. "I'm sorry. I've made things worse," he admitted. "I've been selfish. I knew you would want this and I knew I couldn't provide it. I should never have been with you."

She didn't respond, but she disagreed with her entire body. Her nails dug into his arms, causing him pain. It hurt. And the pain felt good. He deserved it. He would welcome more.

But she didn't punch him. Abruptly—as abruptly as she started crying in the first place, she stopped. And then she pushed him away. Hard. He grunted from the force of her shove; his ribs—the ones that Naruto had fractured during their fight-were still a little tender. She was on her feet before he had time to blink. Her chin wobbled, but her eyes skewered him to the floor. He could see fury rising in her.

He braced himself for a blow.

He could never have prepared enough.

"I am pregnant."

Silence.

Several moments passed. Sasuke's mind wouldn't accept it.

"You… ?" He struggled to form words. He struggled to think. His brain was on fire. He couldn't see through the haze of disorientation and terror.

"I have been pregnant since before my last mission."

Sasuke kept blinking, but he didn't wake up. "You were supposed to prevent that."

Her eyes flashed. " *Me* ? Oh, it's *all* my fault, I suppose?"

"Yes!"

"Accidents happen, Sasuke! If you want to fuck me, you have to accept the possibility that this can happen!"

"You are a medical Nin!" he shouted. "Did you do this on purpose?" Panic-induced fury raged out of control. "If you think I'm going to support you, I won't!"

The expression on her face was one he had never seen before. She was livid. Sakura was angry a lot, but he had never seen anger like this in her. The force of her hand exploded against his cheek. The impact shut off his brain. He stopped thinking, frozen in place, absorbed by the sting.

"I *hate* you, Sasuke!" she screamed at him. "I *hate* you!"

He said nothing.

His silence was the switch.

Instantly, as changeable as the wind, the inferno he sensed within Sakura iced over. The air around her became like winter. But it was worse, much worse, than her fury or her tears. Terror overcame Sasuke the moment he allowed himself to look into her eyes. She looked straight through him, as if he was nothing, as if he didn't exist, and walked out the door.

TBC (most definitely not over!)

I'd love to say more to my reviewers and thank you for your wonderful responses. (I PM/answer some of you, but I don't always

get to everybody!) but I have limited time tonight and I really want to post or it's gonna be another week.

Stuff to review this chapter in case you forgot what you read:

-Naruto pushing Sakura to tell Sasuke

-Amaya/Haro relationship

-Itachi/Sasuke relationship

-Itachi/Amaya relationship

-Dinner party (what Lucia says. What Sachio says. What Ino says. etc. Any ideas/thoughts/concerns you have)

-SasuSaku conflict (most explosive)

I'm setting things up.

Thank you so much to people who reviewed chapter 15!

ImaFreak, Sunshinestar16, ambergur-pyon96, La Nuit Noire, goldenlullaby (very thorough!), Cheetay, Mirette, Darth Malleus, Derrand59, shkh4ever, ijpowers92, AnimeCoupleLover61, The TumTum tree, pink-strawberries, Nitramy, minniemousemom, Azwraith, .261, ElectricSugarPop, Wavelet365, IVlaedhros, , disneytiger, Unorchestrated, strangebloke, pansymoomalfoy32, Macey Hart, naoman16, First Weaver, geckohawaii, Joy-girl, Lifestyle, Suki dah turdle, Alien She, BloomingBlossom7, Sam, Mirette, xXxtellmewhyxXx, xxPiggyBankxx, AvoidedIsland, Rin-elwin, Yonis, closetbookworm, skyrocketingalice, LustedShadow, Selina Reije Hyuuga,

Plan for Next Chapter (though things don't always go according to plan…)

Training for the match—lots of fighting. You'll get to see what everyone is cooking up. Feudal Lords arrive and Naruto makes a

proposal. Hinata is in the story again for the first time in a long time. So is Yukio. Naruto vs. Sasuke about Sakura. Match begins…?

Thank you for your patience! Please recommend this story to anybody you think might like it

Chapter 17

It's getting so long…. So much drama.

White Rain

Chapter 17

By Zapenstap

Sakura was a storm inside herself. She moved through the empty streets like the rushing wind, not seeing or hearing anything or anyone, impervious to all that was before her or behind her. Around her, the village of Konoha was just a haze of buildings barely illuminated by starlight.

She and Sasuke were done.

He didn't want her, didn't want a family, wouldn't *support* any family she gave him, whether she meant to or not. Well fine. Let him get on alone if that was what he wanted. He could grow old and die without her. She was free.

She felt like she could tear down mountains with icy indifference. She was in control now. She was impervious. She was powerful. Nothing could stop her.

As she walked, she recounted their fight, blow by blow, beginning to end, over and over, with grim obsession. The way Sasuke looked at her in that last moment stuck in her mind like a tack. His face had shown fear—real fear. She hadn't seen that much open emotion from him in a long time. It felt good. She had caused that. She had gotten a reaction out of him. Finally. She thought on what she had said, what he had said, and in the end, storming out as she had, brimming with power.

As it cycled through her mind, her confidence dropped a hair. Had she really told Sasuke she *hated* him?

Well , she thought, *He deserved it.*

But her steps faltered with the thought. She knew what *hate* meant to Sasuke.

She came to a halt before the offices of the Hokage, not really sure when she had decided to head there. She supposed she wanted to talk to Naruto, but Naruto certainly wouldn't be here at this hour. He was probably asleep, and she didn't want to wake him. They expected delegates from both the Grass and the Feudal Lords to arrive tomorrow.

"That's all right," she said. "I can handle this myself."

Nobody was around to hear her.

The reality of it struck her forcibly.

She was *alone* .

The buildings around her stood out in sharp relief against the canvas of the night sky. Staring at them, her anger dissipated, all at once, as if it had been sucked into a vacuum. Panic rushed in, dispersing the haze from her thoughts. She turned in a slow circle.

Where was she supposed to sleep tonight?

She couldn't wake Naruto. Well, she could, but she didn't want to. She didn't want to have to explain. Not tonight. Tomorrow morning was soon enough.

She supposed she could go to the hospital. There were plenty of extra beds. Sakura was highly regarded among the medical staff and no one would question her passing out in one of the empty rooms, but she didn't really want to sleep. What she wanted—what she needed—was a friend.

"Ino," she murmured to herself. Ino was prone to stay up late and sleep all morning. And even if she wasn't awake, Ino never minded a knock on the door, not from a friend, not even late at night.

She headed for Ino's house, her footsteps loud in her ears. As she neared, anxiety swelled where her sense of power had receded. Tears began to well up from her eyes. She broke into a run, thoughts racing.

She was alone. She hadn't left Sasuke. Sasuke had broken up with her. She had been the one to walk out, true, but he was the one who dropped it…dropped her…dropped everything…all that they had built together. Like it was waste. Like it was worthless.

Distractedly, she put a hand on her abdomen, eyes darting around the village, but there was no one around. How was she going to have this baby by herself? What was she going to do after she had it? The mere thought made her dizzy. There was no way the tiny life inside her—just an embryo at this stage–could comprehend her feelings, but she checked her desperation anyway. She wanted a baby. She wanted *this* baby. She had for awhile, if she was honest with herself. What was she supposed to do?

A lamp light shone through the front window of in Ino's house. Near breathless from running, Sakura slowed as she reached the porch. She knocked softly on the door.

Tenten answered.

"I…" Sakura fumbled for words.

"Sakura," Tenten said with as much surprise as Sakura felt. "Are you okay? You look pale."

"Where's Ino?" Sakura asked.

"Ino and Chouji had dinner at Lucia's tonight. I'm babysitting."

A chill slid down Sakura's spine. "Lucia's," she repeated numbly. She didn't want to go to Lucia's.

"Ino said she'd be back early since Chouji has patrol tomorrow, but it's not the first time she's said that and then stayed out half the night. Do you want to come in and wait? Or I can take a message."

"No," Sakura said. "That's okay. I… It's not that important."

The skin between Tenten's eyebrows scrunched in worry. Wondering what she must look like, Sakura forced a smile. Without words, she turned, hiding her face from Tenten, and trotted down the porch the way she had come.

She moved swiftly, trying to separate herself from the other girl's eyes. It took her a few moments to understand what she feared. Tenten was nice, almost as nice as Hinata, but she wasn't a close friend, and seeing her made Sakura realize that she'd be skirting looks like that all day tomorrow… perhaps for the rest of her life. Everyone would be talking about it. *Everyone* . Sakura and Sasuke. Broken up. As if there wasn't enough talk about them in the first place. And then it would come out that Sakura was pregnant, and that Sasuke had dropped her because of it. She could already imagine the reactions, the whispers. No one would be cruel, not to her face, but they would talk. The girls especially. They would confer and postulate and nod to each other and say how tragic it was and how *inevitable* and how stupid Sakura was…stupid to have ever loved Sasuke, stupid to have gotten pregnant, stupid stupid stupid.

She was crying before she realized she had stopped walking.

She hadn't done anything to deserve this. *She hadn't done anything.*

Except love Sasuke.

She was standing still in the middle of the street, her body swallowed by shadows. She forced her tears back. For a few moments, her shoulders continued to shake, her body convulsing without sound.

For several long minutes, she endured it, doing nothing, thinking of nothing except white space, into which she fed all of her emotions. Slowly, when she no longer felt anything, she straightened her posture. Even more slowly, she began walking forward.

Lucia's house wasn't far from Ino's. She made for it in silence. By the time she reached the door she felt composed.

She could hear voices on the other side. A great many voices.

Her fist hesitated before the door. Who was in there? What would they say when they saw her? Maybe it wouldn't be better to turn around and go to the hospital instead. But… She didn't want to be alone. Not tonight.

Biting her lip, she knocked.

There was a moment of startled silence, and then the door opened.

"Itachi," she said. They stared at each other.

Her student looked so different than he had the last time she had seen him. He had removed his training gear and was wearing civilian clothing similar to what he had worn when he arrived in Konoha—a white collared shirt with cuffs on the sleeves and dark pants tailored to fit. His face was clean from dirt, his black hair pulled back behind his head. It was much shorter than his father's, just barely long enough to be tied at the nape of the neck, but he stared at her with an Uchiha's dark eyes, the same eyes that Sasuke had. Slowly, he pulled the door open. Yellow light spilled out into the street and across her feet.

"It's Sakura," Itachi announced to a group gathered around a dinner table too large and too fine for the room.

Sakura saw Haro and Amaya at the table with Amaya's father, and to their left Ino and Chouji, and finally Lucia and Itachi's little sister Rina.

"I'm sorry," Sakura said. "I… I didn't mean to interrupt. I'm looking for Ino."

"You're not interrupting," Lucia said. "We were finished. Are you hungry? There's plenty leftover."

Sakura couldn't respond. She hadn't eaten much all day, not since she had declared to Naruto that she would tell Sasuke she was pregnant. She didn't think she could eat now either. She also couldn't seem to find the words to say so.

"Sakura, you look ill," Ino said, standing from the table and crossing the room to take Sakura by the arm. "Are you okay?"

Sakura didn't feel ill. She felt numb. She stared at everyone behind Ino. They were all staring back at her. She recognized them, but their faces were a blur. They all must be wondering what was wrong with her. They would all know tomorrow. There was no way to hide it. Not in a village this size.

"I…" Sakura whispered. "It's Sasuke."

Ino's expression was all concern.

Sakura wanted to hold in her feelings, to keep them private, but the pain was like a bubble about to burst.

"Sasuke…" she began. She didn't want to cry, not in front of all these people. She squeezed her hands into fists on her knees, tightening them until her nails bit into her palms. "Sasuke and I broke up."

Ino clapped a hand over her mouth. Behind Ino, Sakura heard small gasps. She didn't know who made them, but it sounded like the kids. She didn't look at them. All that mattered was that she didn't cry.

"What am I going to do about the baby?" she asked.

The silence in the room was deafening.

Sakura wasn't sure what happened next. She felt dizzy and confused. Somehow, Ino had guided her to a chair at the table, which Chouji had quickly vacated for her. Sakura refused to look at anyone, though she felt Ino sitting beside her, smoothing her hair and occasionally whispering soothing things, but not trying to engage her in conversation. She was only vaguely aware of Sachio standing and bidding goodnight before gathering Amaya on his way out the door. Haro went with them. And then Chouji said something to Ino, who replied with a rapid string of requests, out of which Sakura gathered only that Ino wasn't going to leave, but that Chouji had to. And then Chouji was gone.

The room grew quieter. Itachi and Rina were clearing the table around her. Sakura could sense their concern, but she kept her face averted.

Then Itachi and his sister retreated upstairs. All was silent.

"Ino," she cried. Tears formed in pools at the corners of her eyes. She could feel them hovering, like drops of rain on a windowsill. She was still shaking. She felt terribly cold.

A hot cup of tea was placed on the table in front of her. She stared at it a minute, watching the steam rise from the rim, before she was able to glance up at the person who had set it there. For a moment, she had forgotten entirely whose house she was in. She had thought she and Ino were alone. Immediately, she wiped her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said to Lucia. "I didn't mean to ruin your party."

"Nonsense," Lucia said. She set a cup of tea in front of Ino too, and then one for herself as she sat softly in the chair on the corner just to Sakura's right. "The party was over."

"That's right," Ino exclaimed. "It's tea time. Just for the girls."

Sakura stared at the cup. "I do not think tea will help me."

"With a man?" Lucia murmured. "I find it doesn't hurt."

Sakura was startled, looking up at the woman. Was Lucia making a joke? She had not thought the woman had a sense of humor. Distracted, she slowly lifted the tea cup and took a careful sip. It was hot, burning her tongue and her throat, but she drank it in long swallows, closing her eyes as the searing hot water settled in her stomach.

"What happened?" Ino asked her quietly.

"Sasuke…" She felt tears rising again and choked them down, swallowing them so she could talk. She drew deep, calculated breath. "Sasuke told me he definitely doesn't want children. He said that we need to break up because he can't give me what I want, and that we should never have been together. And when I said I was pregnant, he told me he wouldn't…that he wouldn't support me."

Ino gasped. Even Lucia looked surprised.

"He threw you out?" Ino demanded.

"No. I left, but… I was in such a state. I don't know what I was thinking. I don't know what to do." She bit her lip. "Maybe he's right. Maybe we *shouldn't* have ever been together. It's not like I haven't ever doubted it. Sasuke is… so troubled, but I *really* love him, so I just thought…" She paused, reflecting. She thought she could love away his trouble. She really was stupid.

"You are so good to Sasuke," Ino said. "He is stupid to reject you. It's not your fault. Don't pressure yourself with thoughts like what *should* have been."

"But the baby," she hiccupped. "What am I going to do?"

"Don't worry about that either!" Ino said. "You're keeping it?"

Sakura nodded.

"Well, then that's settled, so don't worry. You're months away from actually being a mother. You're not even showing. For now, just take care of yourself. If you need *anything* , you ask me, not Sasuke. Leave him out of it. I will help you with anything you need. Absolutely anything. I will be happy to."

Sakura started to cry, but this time she didn't stop it, because it was from relief. "You are a truly good friend, Ino!"

Ino pushed Sakura's hair away from her face and smiled at her. "Hey," she said. "Don't *cry* . Seriously, Sakura. You'll put wrinkles in that pretty forehead of yours!"

Sakura smiled through her tears. She couldn't help it.

Lucia was watching the pair of them with an expression Sakura could only describe as mystified, as if she had never seen friendship before.

Ino seemed to intuitively pick up on it because she turned to Lucia with a laugh. "Sakura and I have been friends since we were in Academy together. She had this complex about her forehead being too wide. But it's pretty, isn't it?"

"Very," Lucia agreed.

Sakura hiccupped, blushing. "We weren't always friends," she reminded Ino. "For a time, we were rivals."

"Oh, that's right!" Ino said. "We had that big falling out." She started laughing. "Over Sasuke! I still can't believe how *seriously* I felt about that at the time."

Sakura tried to smile. "You know, Ino," she said. "I remember you swearing that you wouldn't lose to me. I swore too. I swore up and down that *I'd* get Sasuke, but you stood your ground, swearing you wouldn't lose to me in love."

Ino was quiet.

"Well," Sakura said. "We both got what we wanted, didn't we? I got Sasuke. And you got love. You've got a family, and I…" Tears poured over her cheeks again. She scrubbed them away furiously.

"Sakura, don't," Ino said. "Don't say such things. It's not wrong to love someone. You didn't lose."

"But I wasn't wrong to leave him either, was I?" she said, clutching her teacup. "I know I wasn't."

"He deserved it."

Sakura was grateful for the unquestioning support, but she felt terrible. "I wish I hadn't said those things to him."

"What did you say?" Ino asked.

She wanted to cry just thinking about it. "I said I hated him."

"Oh, Sakura. Sasuke knows you don't hate him."

"But I *said* I did. When he said he wouldn't support me, I just… I screamed it." She sucked air into her lungs. "Why did he say he wouldn't *support* me?"

"He'll regret that," Ino said immediately. "You scared him, that's all. He'll think things over and he'll apologize. You'll see."

Maybe Ino was right, but Sasuke had demonstrated before now that he wasn't the swiftest to work himself out of emotional turmoil. When confronted with conflict, he dug in, clinging to his feelings. How long would it take for his stubbornness to dissolve? And who was to say it was just stubbornness? He sounded so sure that he didn't want children.

But he was going to have one. She had been going to tell him every day for weeks, but the conversation never went well in her mind, so

she refrained. Just one day more, she thought. Just one more day. And now…

She didn't want to think about it. She didn't know what to do. All she knew was she couldn't go back there.

"Ino," she whispered quietly. "Can I stay with you for awhile?"

"Of course!"

Sakura drank the rest of her tea in silence. Lucia refilled her cup, saying nothing, and Sakura just sat with her hands around it, feeling the heat of the water warming her palms through the porcelain.

"I don't know what to do with myself," she confessed.

For some reason, Ino glanced at Lucia. "Sakura," she said.

"What?"

"I know you've been overwhelmed, but… you realize your team has a match in three days, right? I don't think you've prepared them as much as you could. There's still more they could learn."

Sakura's eyes flew wide open.

It wasn't that she had forgotten. Her team was capable and they'd been practicing. She'd just been…pregnant…and when she wasn't stewing about that, she'd been focusing on Itachi's relationship with Sasuke and meeting with Naruto and worrying about the Feudal Lords and Lucia and the Grass and the fate of the village. She had given Haro some lessons in healing, and she *had* been joining team practices in the mornings to give instruction, but in the past few days she'd been skipping them. How many days had it been? She wanted to pound her head on the table.

"What is wrong with me?" she demanded. "I'm such a complete failure!"

Ino soothed her immediately. "You are not! That's not what I'm saying. You're just… You've been hiding a big secret and it's been taking all of your energy. Well, now that it's out, you should reprioritize. There's still time. You asked what you should do. Teach your team!"

Sakura straightened and wiped her eyes. "You're right," she said to Ino. "I'll teach, starting tomorrow morning."

Right after I tell Naruto about Sasuke, she thought grimly. She wished it didn't have to be done. She was afraid of Naruto's reaction, but it was better to get that out of the way before the Feudal Lords arrived. Her personal problems couldn't be allowed to compromise the village.

Daybreak brought only cold, empty light.

Sasuke hadn't slept at all. He was still sitting upright, still on the couch where Sakura had been waiting for him, staring at the same door she had stared at. He had been there all night, his mind empty of all thoughts-vacuous and cold.

He sensed the attack approaching. He stayed where he was, waiting for the storm. He had known this was coming. He was ready.

The door burst open with such force that the wood splintered.

Sasuke rose.

"Sasuke!"

Naruto was livid. In the face of all that fury, all that emotion, Sasuke steeled himself. It was the only way to deal with Naruto.

"What did you say to Sakura?" Naruto demanded.

"We broke up," Sasuke answered coldly.

"I gathered that! What did you *say* to her?"

"A bunch of things. She's pregnant. She's—"

"I know she is! I figured it out *yesterday* ."

"You knew? You knew before me?"

"I told her to tell you!"

Sasuke was silent.

"What did you say to her?" Naruto demanded.

His voice sounded cold, even to his own ears. "I told her that I don't want kids. I've been clear about that. She knew I wouldn't be pleased if she-."

"Well *I* told her you loved her and that you would be happy that she was having a baby even if you were scared at first!"

Sasuke reeled. "You can't make promises for other people, Naruto!"

"I didn't know you'd act like a…like a…" No word seemed vile enough to describe it. "Did you really say you wouldn't support her?"

"She said things to me too," Sasuke objected stubbornly. "She said she hated me."

"Oh, come on! You know she doesn't *hate* you! She loves you, Sasuke. She's been head over heels in love with you since she was five."

"She's a medical Nin…"

"She's your girlfriend! You love her! How can you say to her that you won't support her?"

"She knew I didn't want kids! She *knew* . It's like she did it on purpose. Well, she can't force it on me!"

Naruto's face was all hard angles. " *I* can!"

Sasuke was shocked.

Rocks could be smashed to pieces on Naruto's expression. "It was an accident, Sasuke! She told me it was. But just so we're clear, it makes no difference either way. Not to me. Your kid. You support it. End of discussion."

"I don't want kids, Naruto!"

"Sasuke, shut up! Are you listening to yourself? What you want doesn't matter. It's too late for that. Deny it all you want. Be angry. Be scared. Blame Sakura. Blame me. It doesn't matter. This is happening! It is happening, ready or not, whether you want it or not. You are having a kid. It's *happening* ."

Sasuke trembled.

"And it's not just happening to you," Naruto continued, pointing at him. "So stop acting like you're some kind of victim. Sakura is having a baby. *Your* baby. I can't believe you said you wouldn't support her! If it wouldn't cause a rift in the village, I would punch you in the face right now!"

Sasuke's legs felt weak. He wanted to sit down. "Sakura and I… We shouldn't have been together."

"But you were! You've been together for *years* and now you've got a kid coming. You're going to be a father, Sasuke! Accept it and tell Sakura you will do your part!"

You're going to be a father.

He wanted to throw up. He felt almost dizzy with nausea.

"Sasuke?"

Sasuke closed his eyes, not answering. Slowly, he sank down onto the couch, trying not to collapse. His legs were shaking. He couldn't remember ever having felt like this. Maybe when he learned about Itachi… But no. This was different even than that time. "I… I need a moment."

He hung his head, breathing deep, waiting for the panic to pass.

He felt Naruto sit down beside him. The fight seemed to have gone out of him. At least, when Sasuke looked up, the hardness was gone from Naruto's face.

"Are you all right?" Naruto asked him. "You look really pale."

"I don't know," he confessed, his voice barely audible, even to his own ears.

Naruto regarded him with patient eyes. In some ways, Sasuke preferred the hardness. Naruto's authority as the Hokage was like a kick in the face, but Naruto's compassion as a friend made him feel his weakness down to the soles of his feet. He preferred the kick. He might have been trying to goad Naruto into punching him.

"You have to talk to Sakura," Naruto said. "Tell her you were wrong. Tell her you were frightened and angry, but you take back what you said and that you'll love and support her."

"I can't."

"Sasuke," Naruto's tone was reproachful. He was getting that familiar stubborn look. "You have to."

Sasuke shook his head.

"Come on. I know you're not a coward. Stop acting like one. What are you afraid of? Do you think you might fail? You won't. You've

been great at everything you've ever done. This will be no different. You will see. You'll be a great dad. Just—"

"Naruto, stop. It's not that easy. I need to just… I need you to leave me alone to think about this."

He could tell that that was an extremely difficult request. Naruto glared at him with eyes the burned bright blue.

Sasuke met them slowly. "Please."

"How long?" Naruto demanded.

"I don't know."

Naruto crossed his arms. "Sasuke, this is time sensitive. Sakura is *furious* with you, but she does love you. She *wants* you to apologize. She will make up with you if you do. But if you don't talk to her-"

"Naruto," Sasuke interrupted. "I *need* to think. Please stop badgering me about Sakura. She's strong." He took a deep breath. "And the truth is she's better off without me."

Naruto stared at him. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do. I can't take care of her. I think I've demonstrated that pretty well."

"Sasuke," Naruto said quietly, ominously calm. "I'll be frank: This is a mistake."

Sasuke looked at the ground between his feet.

I feel like all I do is worry about you... My feelings always seem less important.

How long had she been suffering with that? He couldn't deny that that expressed their relationship pretty well. He was consumed by his problems. He always had been. They had consumed her too.

What else had she said? He didn't tell her anything. She was right. He was afraid even to let himself know what he was really thinking and feeling, especially when it came to his past. What he was struggling with was a burden no one else should have to bear, especially Sakura. And she was bearing it all the time. How heavy must she feel being near him? It wasn't fair to her.

"I love her," he admitted, "but I don't need to be with her."

He stood up from the bench.

"Sasuke," Naruto gasped. He looked stricken.

What he needed was to be alone.

"You're right about…everything else. I'll do what I have to do, but Sakura is better off without me." He took a deep breath, looking at Naruto soberly. "It's over."

Itachi woke to birds chirping, feeling groggy. Had he overslept? Yes, he decided, but not by much. His muscles screamed in protest as he straightened in bed. They were stiff and sore from his training with Sasuke yesterday, but it wasn't a bad kind of hurt. It was the kind that meant he was getting stronger.

Still, the weights on his wrists and ankles made him groan as he got to his feet and began getting ready for training. He didn't take them off. He had promised Sasuke he wouldn't, not until the match.

Sasuke.

The thought brought Sakura to his mind, standing alone in his doorway, looking pale and wan in the moonlight. Sakura could punch through solid rock. He had seen her do it. But last night, she looked like a breath of air might break her.

He wasn't sure how he was supposed to feel. It wasn't any of his business, but he was kind of angry about it. As far as he could tell, Sakura had been nothing but devoted to Sasuke. Sasuke had seemed committed to her too. If Sakura was pregnant, the right thing to do was to marry her and provide for his family… wasn't it?

Maybe he was too young to really understand, but Itachi didn't think that even Gehard would have done otherwise.

Irritated, he threw on his hand guards, buckling them at the wrist, and slipped on his cleats. When he was ready, he tiptoed out of his room, being careful not to wake either Rina or his mother, and headed toward the training grounds for team practice.

Amaya and Haro were waiting for him at the edge of the glen. He opened his mouth to apologize for being late, and then shut it without speaking.

His teammates didn't appear to have noticed his absence. They were crouching in the bushes, facing the training grounds with their backs to him, not making a sound. Itachi dropped low and joined them as slowly and as silently as he knew how. He must have been quiet because his approach startled Haro. Amaya raised a finger to her lips and gestured for Itachi to follow her gaze. He crouched beside Haro and looked where they were looking.

The secluded glen where they trained every day wasn't empty this morning. Another team had gotten there first.

Itachi recognized Yukio immediately.

Garbed all in gray and black, his opponent was easily the most physically ferocious of any Genin in Konoha. He was both taller and broader in the shoulders than Itachi, with hair so dark as to be almost black, but shorter than Itachi's, just a few inches long from root to tip, and eyes that were light gray. He had a trim, athletic build, muscled from the top of his head to his littlest toe.

The girl, Michiko, was the shortest Genin in Konoha, but she made up for it with flare. Her training garb looked like a circus costume. Her divided skirt had been doctored up with brightly colored patches sewn to every inch of available space and her arm guards were fire red, the same color as her long, wayward locks. She was a small package, but tightly wound; when she moved, it was like a spring.

Jumei was slighter than Amaya and shorter than Itachi. He wore glasses on a face that looked a bit like a mouse. For a boy, he didn't look like much of a threat, but his eyes were quick and so were his hands. He attacked like a mouse too, furtively, staying close to the ground, but with an ability to stay absurdly still and then dart with surprising speed.

But it was to Yukio that Itachi's eyes were repeatedly drawn.

Had Itachi thought he was fast yesterday? He wasn't fast. Yukio was fast.

The way Yukio moved was as fluid as it was quick. He moved like a serpent, dancing through the steps of hand-to-hand combat with both power and grace, defending himself effortlessly from Jumei's and Michiko's combined attacks, predicting both maneuver and counter maneuver. When he struck, it was like lightning.

Itachi watched as Michiko leapt into the air, light and swift as a bird, and went down just as fast, coughing from a single jab to the throat. Yukio landed softly and was moving again before his body had completely absorbed the impact, swiping both of Jumei's legs out from under him. The sequence of motion was like a ripple.

Michiko and Jumei rebounded and separated, hardly pausing to recuperate. Michiko jumped into a nearby tree, danced across the branches, and vanished amidst the leaves. At the same time, Jumei raced along the ground in a wide arc. The tips of his fingers pulsed with chakra energy.

"That's a medical technique," Haro whispered. "It's a surgical art, but it can be used in offense. He can cut with those hands."

As Jumei drew close to Yukio, Michiko appeared again from above. She dropped from the tree, brandishing a long-handled kunai knife, or a short-handled spear, from a holster on her back, the point facing downward, directly at Yukio's head.

Yukio didn't move. His hands moved through a succession of hand signals.

"Substitution?" Itachi muttered. That was what he would have done, but this looked more complicated.

"Could be a water clone," Haro said. "Yukio's proficient at them."

"It's the shadow cloak," Amaya whispered.

Itachi thought Amaya had it right by what he saw. Yukio's body blurred. Darkness seemed to seep from the center of his chest like a blot of ink on tissue. It spread to the tips of his fingers until the shape of him was little more than a mass of darkness, the edges indistinct, like a cloud. Itachi could only sort of tell it was a person; he couldn't make out Yukio's hands or legs or eyes at all.

Michiko's spear punctured the darkness, but the darkness merely… shifted.

Itachi didn't know precisely what happened. Michiko screamed, but all he saw was her body slamming against the trunk of the tree, her spear flying out of her hand and sent spinning in the opposite direction. The shadow that had been Yukio shifted again. It was hard to track, as difficult as trying to follow flickering patterns of light, but some part of it caught Jumei by the arm and sent the kid sprawling in the dirt.

The shadow around Yukio dissipated like fog evaporating in sunlight. He flipped a kunai knife in the air, caught it by the handle, and turned

toward Itachi's team.

"You can come out."

Itachi didn't move. Beside him, Haro was as stiff as a stone.

Amaya leapt to her feet. "This is our training ground, Yukio!" she shouted.

Itachi and Haro rose slowly beside her.

"Says who?" Yukio asked.

"We've been training here for weeks!"

"Yeah, I know," Yukio said, and smiled broadly. "We've seen you."

Amaya's mouth worked, but no sound came out.

Behind Yukio, Jumei was fussing over Michiko, but the girl's eyes were on Itachi's team. She was smiling.

"You've spied on us?" Itachi demanded.

"On them," Yukio said with an air of charitableness, gesturing to Haro and Amaya. "I could care less about *you* , even if you are training with Sasuke. What of it? Are you saying that you didn't spy on *us* ?"

Amaya turned bright pink. As far as Itachi knew, they had kept as much distance from Yukio and his team as possible.

Yukio laughed in their faces. "Really? I mean, we probably would have spotted you, but still. You didn't even *try* ? What kind of Shinobi are you?"

"Honorable ones," Haro muttered. Itachi nodded, wishing Haro had said it stronger. But Yukio grinned, and Haro flushed. Itachi

understood. What sense was there in honor for a Shinobi, who fought by tricks and stealth?

"We don't need to cheat," Amaya said haughtily. Itachi nodded again. That sounded better.

"I disagree. I've seen your moves, and you clearly need help," Yukio said. He gestured to his teammates. "So we talked it over and decided to be generous. You know: Let you get a taste of the pummeling you're going to get."

Haro leapt into the glen, both fists flying for Yukio's face. "Shut your smart mouth, Yukio, or I'll shut it for you!"

Yukio lunged to the side, avoiding Haro's head-on assault with a hoot of laughter. Grim-faced and serious, Amaya surged after Haro, kunai knives rotating from their holsters on the inside of her sleeves to her hands, but Jumei and Michiko were on their feet, obstructing her path. Itachi didn't pause to think. He skirted around them, coming to Haro's aid in Amaya's stead.

Yukio flashed Itachi a cocksure grin, his hands flickering through hand signs for a jutsu Itachi didn't recognize.

But Itachi was ready, his own hands moving. *"Katon—!"*

Itachi just had time to see Yukio's eyes widen in surprise before Itachi's air was suddenly cut off, the great fireball jutsu choked to nothing in his throat by the hand that wrapped around his neck from behind and pushed him toward the ground. Chakra flowed into him, then straight through him—someone else's chakra. That chakra packed a punch. It hit the ground just before his body did, and the earth erupted where it touched. Yukio did a flip backwards just before rock and dirt imploded where his feet had been. Itachi found himself lying face down at the lip of the hole. He was unharmed but for his surprise, and pushed himself up onto his elbows. He and Yukio stared at each other across a gash in the ground that was at least six feet deep, like a grave.

"Enough!"

Itachi rolled over to see Sakura standing over both of them, her face as hard as an anvil, her green eyes blazing with fury.

"Yukio, you know better!"

Yukio wiped dirt from his face and said nothing. Michiko and Jumei were staring at Sakura with identical spooked expressions.

"Get out of here," Sakura said to them fiercely. "If I catch you within *sight* of Team Four before the match, you'll be sorry."

Yukio got to his feet and retreated, Michiko and Jumei following close on his heels.

"Wow," Haro said when they were out of sight. "That was awesome, sensei."

Amaya didn't say anything.

Sakura fixed them all with a stare. "You shouldn't have taken his bait," she said crisply.

"He was in our training ground," Haro protested.

"He was trying to rattle you before the match," Sakura told him. "It worked."

Amaya lowered her eyes. Haro muttered under his breath.

Sakura leaned over and offered Itachi her hand. He took it. She pulled him to his feet, her grip as strong as steel.

"As for you," she said. " *Never* show your jutsu to an opponent if you don't have to. I stopped you from finishing, but Yukio knows you've learned fire manipulation now. He'll be expecting it in the arena."

Itachi was silent. He wanted to kick himself. The fire element jutsu Sasuke had taught him were his best cards. What was he supposed to do now?

"We should've spied on Yukio," Haro muttered.

"He would have seen us," Amaya said.

"I doubt it," Sakura said. "No Shinobi sees *everything* . If you were unobtrusive enough, you probably could have spied on him. However, it might be good that you didn't. I think he was expecting you to, which means he probably wanted to feed you lies about his team's abilities or strategy."

"It did seem like he *wanted* us to spy, didn't it?" Haro muttered. "Why else would he show us all of that?"

"To show off," Amaya muttered. "But I think we can expect more in the arena than what he showed."

Haro looked grim.

Sakura nodded. "Never mind Yukio," she said. "I have something I'd like to say to the three of you."

They turned their attention to her. Itachi thought she looked weary.

"I want to apologize," Sakura said to them. "I haven't been instructing you as I should. I know that you are capable, and can carry on basic training without me, so I've let you, but I should have been helping you more." She paused. She didn't say she'd been concerned with finding out she was pregnant, but she didn't need to. They were all thinking it. "I hope you can forgive me."

"It's okay," Haro said. He looked flummoxed at being asked to forgive a teacher.

"Do we stand a chance?" Itachi asked.

Sakura smiled at him. "Of course," she said. "Yukio is talented, but you three can defeat him with the right strategy. Just remember that you aren't just facing Yukio. Michiko is not only a little firecracker of a taijutsu fighter, but her real strength is genjutsu. And Jumei is a very talented healer, though I think I can teach you how to handicap him, Haro, if you're up for it."

"Yeah," Haro said. "That sounds great."

"Amaya, your white star jutsu is best suited for mid-range attacks, but I think we should expand it to long range. As far as I know, Yukio's team doesn't have any far reaching attacks outside of Michiko's genjutsu, which you should be able to avoid if you mind what I've taught you already. A long range attack will give your team an advantage."

Itachi's mind was spinning. Yukio was going to come right after *him* . He knew it. And now Yukio knew he could use fire manipulation. "Maybe you can teach me lightning element?" he suggested. "That could be long range."

Sakura's brow furrowed. "Two elements is extremely rare in Genin. I mean, Sasuke knew two, but—"

" *Yukio* is way beyond Genin level," Itachi urged. "And I've got to do something that will surprise him! Besides, I've learned some lightning already. I just need help with it."

Sakura studied him with a frown. He knew what she was thinking. She was reflecting on when Itachi had tried to teach himself lightning manipulation to try and learn Chidori and had almost fried his arm. Did that really count as having 'learned some already'? Itachi knew it didn't. Sakura had berated him profusely then, even as she healed his burns. Itachi had promised never to do it again, and hadn't given it much thought since Sasuke kept refusing to teach him Chidori, but just *having* two elements might be worth the effort. He needed something that would really shock Yukio. Literally shocking him would be nice.

"Look, it's obvious that Yukio is more powerful than I am," Itachi explained. "He is faster and stronger and he probably has a dozen jutsu that I can't counter. He is going to come after me and I'm going to have to have some tricks he doesn't expect. Maybe I don't have to fully master lightning. If I can learn just enough to make Yukio *think* I intend to hit him with a lightning jutsu, instead of a Katon like he might expect, I can trick him."

"That's an interesting idea, Itachi," Amaya said, "but elemental manipulation takes too much time to learn. Learning lighting in two days isn't possible."

Sakura was frowning. "Although Amaya makes a good point, she might be wrong in this case," she said. "Itachi, I didn't tell you this before because I didn't want you to try to learn Chidori on your own, but your affinity to lightning is almost as strong as your affinity to fire."

Amaya looked startled.

"Then why did it fry my arm?" Itachi asked.

" *Because* your affinity is strong," Sakura said. "If it wasn't, you wouldn't have had any success at all."

"Then you can teach me?"

It was a revelation. Itachi had never thought to ask Sakura. He had always asked Sasuke, who had always said no. When Sakura was *with* Sasuke, she had said no too, but now…

Hope flared in his heart.

"Nature manipulation isn't my forte," Sakura admitted, "but I do understand it. Just being around Sasuke has taught me a lot. The trouble with lightning is its sheer power. If you lose control, it's exceedingly painful. It can even be deadly. Amaya is right. Three days isn't really enough, not for most Genin, but *you* have

exceedingly good chakra control, and with a strong affinity to boot, some basic techniques aren't beyond possibility in the time we have, especially if you only intend them as a feint. "

Sasuke felt his heartbeat quicken with excitement. "I don't care if it's painful," he said. "It won't be as painful as Yukio kicking my ass in the arena. We can look at it as an opportunity for Haro to practice healing."

"What?" Haro said.

Sakura smiled. "In that case, we all have a lot of work to do."

The arrival of the Feudal Lords produced the fanfare and respectful silence that Lucia expected.

She watched the procession from a distance, half-hidden by a stone wall that wrapped around the garden adjacent to Ino's flower shop. From her vantage point, Lucia was able to observe unseen as a red-curtained palanquin was escorted through the streets to the Hokage's offices. The Feudal Lords had sent only two of their number, but they were escorted by a dozen Jounin and watched by a hundred more.

The Feudal Lords arrived only hours on the heels of the delegates from the Grass, none of whom Lucia had recognized, though she had watched their arrival too.

It had been an exciting day. The Hokage had gone missing when the Grass arrived. He had vanished from his offices in the morning, following a visit from Sakura, and didn't return until nearly midday. Now the village was abuzz with rumors regarding the unexpected pregnancy of Sakura Haruno, who was said to have split from Sasuke Uchiha.

Lucia didn't know what to make of it. Villages were small, so it was not a surprise that matters like pregnancies and broken relationships

had a resounding impact, especially when one of the figures involved was as famous—or perhaps infamous—as Sasuke Uchiha, who was the Hokage's closest friend.

As a result, she had overheard a lot of things about Sasuke from the traffic in and out of the flower shop, which was located on Konoha's main road and central to the rumor mill. People seemingly came in with the sole objective of gossiping with Ino.

Ino was a skilled gossiper. From what Lucia picked up from the conversations, she was extremely well-liked on the whole. She welcomed everyone with cheer and always said just enough to satisfy curiosity without saying so much as to betray confidence, every word layered with "I think" or "I heard" or "I can't be sure, but" to dilute her opinion.

Some of what Lucia overheard the others say surprised her. Many of the comments were about Sasuke's troubles and how it was no surprise that he couldn't maintain a relationship. Lucia had not known that a rift between Sasuke and the village in the past that had been a criminally bloody affair—or almost been; it was hard to tell from the snippets—and that the mess had evolved directly from what had happened with Sasuke's brother—Itachi Uchiha. *That* unfailingly brought the gossip right around to her son, and the match that was days away.

She supposed she could not have asked for a better coincidence, or a riskier one.

Lucia was fairly certain that everyone in Konoha was going to see her son's match now, including the delegates from the Grass and the Feudal Lords. That was both fortunate and ominous. To a certain extent, her plans hinged on how her son fared in the arena, and she had no power to sway the outcome of that. It was so close now. She kept telling herself that all would be well, win or lose, but she couldn't repress her fear. What if her son was—she could hardly allow her mind to contemplate it—killed?

Ino assured her that killing in a match between Genin was highly unlikely. Despite the lethal capability of Shinobi techniques, matches were meant to be instructive and everyone, down to the newest Academy recruit, understood that. Every Konoha Shinobi was valuable to the village, Ino said; fighting *for* each other, not against each other, was the core of their strength. Ino also reminded her that instructors could step in to stop the fighting if things got out of hand, though doing so was a last resort to save a life, as it ended the match in the favor of the one who did not need assistance. Even knowing this, Lucia couldn't help thinking that "unlikely" and "impossible" were not the same thing. Getting the village to accept her son as a true Shinobi was what this was all about in the first place. How was she to know if Yukio would consider her son, an outsider, to be valuable enough not to kill?

So it all came down to Itachi. She knew her son. He was bright and clever and strong. He would do his best, and work his hardest, but she knew too little of Shinobi to know if Itachi's best was sufficient. What if, as some were saying, he lost within seconds of the start of the match? Or worse, what if he was toyed with and humiliated?

Itachi didn't talk about his training. She had no idea what he had learned and didn't ask.

She was contemplating whether or not she should ask him how he felt about his chances when the door to the flower shopped open again, the bell ringing on the door to announce new arrivals. She glanced over her shoulder to see who had entered, and barely masked her surprise.

By their headbands, the four ninja walking into the flower shop were from the Village Hidden in the Grass.

Lucia didn't know them, and Shinobi were often difficult to read, but she recognized a guarded, stressed, and weary group of people when she saw it. It was what she expected to see, but it filled her with unease. She knew the Grass to be a poorer village than

Konoha, with a small population and fewer fighters. If Konoha was struggling, the Grass must be desperate.

That was a fine playground for Gehard to play in. She wondered if these Grass ninja had dealt personally with any of the families her husband had brought to this country.

Her mouth tightened at the thought.

The Grass ninja saw her almost at the same moment she saw them. By their expressions of surprise, they recognized her immediately.

Ino came out of the back room at the same moment Lucia turned to face the new arrivals.

"Oh," she gasped, stopping short. "How may I help you, Grass Ninja?"

The Grass ninja did not appear to hear her. All four of them stared at Lucia with identical, unblinking eyes.

"Are you Lucia Van Alstyne?" one of them asked her. He was male, and exceedingly tall. "You can't be otherwise. The description was exact."

"I am," she said. She saw no reason to lie.

"Your husband misses you," one of the others said. This one was female, blonde and muscular, with a puckered scar running sideways across the full length of her face. "He bids you to return with us to our village, so that he might take you home."

Lucia smiled. "I'm sure he'll get along well enough without me for awhile longer."

"He thought you would say something like that," the woman replied. "He bid us to tell you that if you have no concern for yourself, to please think of your daughter. He thinks her too good for these

lands. He says she is delicate and talented, and that you are cruel to bring her here."

"Rina is well," Lucia replied coolly.

"We hear your son is fighting in a match," one of the ones who had not yet spoken said.

"He is."

The tall Grass ninja snorted. "We have gotten to know your people well in the past few weeks. They are rich beyond our dreaming, but they are obscenely soft. There is no question. Uchiha blood or not, your son's upbringing is weak. From the few months he has been here, he can't possibly understand the first thing about what it means to be a Shinobi. He will be defeated by his Leaf opponent."

Lucia raised her eyebrows. "Is that a fact?"

"It is."

Lucia saw an opportunity and seized it. "Would you care to wager?"

Hinata poured tea for the Hokage and his guests, careful to think of him as *the Hokage* to avoid making any personal attachment obvious. She was still surprised that Lucia had guessed at their intimacy so easily that one time she had been a guard for the woman. Hinata's reserve and gentle countenance often shielded her from scrutiny. She would have to be more careful.

The Hokage was as impressive as she had ever seen him, save perhaps when he was in battle. He wore his finest clothes, the cloak that was the legacy of his father, the Fourth Hokage, and the headdress that was the symbol of leadership for all Hokages past and present. He sat cross legged on a red tasseled cushion at the head of a serving table, one that had lowered to a height just above the ground in the traditional fashion.

Hinata poured tea into glass cups that had been sandblasted to be nearly opaque, save for the symbol of the Leaf etched into the side. It was a very fine tea set, one of the best in the Leaf village, as were the tasseled cushions, the tea itself, and the food.

As was only appropriate when entertaining the Feudal Lords.

Their two guests, Daichi and Hiroki, were lesser lords, the brother and youngest son of the Land of Fire's ruling Daimyo. Lord Daichi had a face creased with age, frown lines permanently affixed to his expression. He never blinked. Lord Hiroki was youthful and hot-eyed, with a strong jaw and jet black hair pulled back behind his head at the nape of his neck in a thin braid.

The only other guest at the table was Shikamaru, who sat more casually on the Hokage's right, one knee propped up and an arm flung carelessly over it. He avoided yawning or looking bored, perhaps because this meeting—though pleasant in appearances—had dire consequences for the village.

Hinata did not wear any ninja gear. Though it was obvious from the headband tied loosely around her neck that she was a Shinobi, she played the role of a servant, and was happy to do it. Her eyes were the best eyes in the village for observation, and were put to the best use from an unobtrusive position. As she was also heir to the head of Hyuuga Clan, she was equipped with proper breeding in grace and manners to be a credit to the village. Besides which, Naruto trusted her. Her presence had a calming effect on him, which he told her in confidence he might need. So she kept her mouth closed and her eyes and ears open.

"I'm afraid it's not a question of worthiness, Hokage," Lord Daichi said. He spoke in a voice as dry and worn as his face. "None of the Feudal Lords doubt the worthiness of the Leaf Village. It is unquestionably the greatest of the Shinobi villages and deserving of all its honors."

Naruto did not touch his tea. Hinata could sense his mood and understood why, though those who did not know him personally might misunderstand, mistaking his refusal as a display of condescension. Social politics were not Naruto's strong suit. The truth was that, at the moment, Naruto lacked the delicacy to handle a teacup. He was an emotionally-driven man, a leader of strong passion and bold action, and he had had a…riotous day already. If he picked up one of those glass cups now he might accidentally crush it.

A few moments passed in silence.

"So, you're not going to give us what we need to keep operating," Naruto concluded at length. He spoke through a locked jaw, his blue eyes hardened like ice. An enemy would have quaked before such a gaze, but the Feudal Lords were governors, not enemies. Konoha's existence depended on them. They did not bat an eyelash.

"I'm afraid we *cannot* ," Lord Hiroki said, his apology delivered in cool tones. "Our current expenses forbid the...lavishness…we have procured to the village in more troubled times."

"You're saying you have no money?"

"What funds we have are needed for other matters."

"Other matters more important than the safety of the nation?" Naruto demanded.

Lord Hiroki raised an eyebrow at Naruto's tone. Hinata coughed softly, trying to catch Naruto's eye. He glanced at her and relaxed a little, but not much. At the same time, the wizened Lord Daichi put on a hand on his nephew's arm.

The older lord responded to Naruto's question in a dusty voice. "Safety from what, Hokage? Bandits on the road? We do not pretend that there is no need for protection. Crime does occur, but instances

as they are do not often require the…specialization…of Shinobi services. From what do Shinobi now protect us?"

"Other Shinobi."

"The villages are largely cooperative these days, thanks to you," Lord Hiroki said smoothly. "Conflicts between Shinobi are rarer than they have ever been."

Naruto seemed torn between feeling flattered and furious. Hinata did not blame him. All the positive changes Naruto had made in the Shinobi world were effectively eliminating the need for Shinobi.

"Then why do I keep getting requests for assassinations and kidnappings?"

"There will always be requests for such things. What of it? You *refuse* them more often than not," Lord Hiroki said.

Naruto glared.

Lord Daichi sighed. "Oh, don't look so fierce. Hiroki did not mean you should accept such requests indiscriminately. We perfectly comprehend your reasons for refusal and we agree with your principles, but the facts remain unchanged. Shinobi are relics of a bloodier time. They were crafted to do the dirty work of a country plagued by war and murder. It was necessary then. But now that such unpleasantness has abated, and such tasks refused even when they are requested, what are Shinobi *for* ?"

Naruto didn't answer that question. "What would you have me do?" he asked. "Downsize the village?"

"To start, yes. There have never been so many Shinobi as there are now. There were fewer even at the height of our troubled history. We do not need so many trained killers. There is no work for them."

"I can't do that," Naruto said. "The village exists for the Shinobi and the Shinobi for the village. I cannot ask anyone to leave."

"They needn't *leave* ," Lord Daichi said, "but we cannot be paying so many people assassin's wages when the work you have for hire is guarding and errand-running! Each year, your debts only increase. Haven't you looked at the books? The village is bleeding money."

An unfortunate euphemism , Hinata thought. Naruto's eyes flashed with anger.

"I can't tell Shinobi who have spilled *real* blood for this country that they are no longer wanted!"

"You must understand what you are asking from the Land of Fire," Lord Hiroki countered. "If we give funds to you to train soldiers for battles that may never come, we take funds away from the common people who desperately need those allocations to rebuild. So much was destroyed by your battles! The whole nation is suffering, not just the Shinobi villages. *Industry* is where this country is now headed, not war."

Another moment of silence followed.

Shikamaru nodded to Naruto. His eyes seemed to say ' *it's time.'*

Hinata didn't say anything and didn't let anything show on her face, but her heart quickened. She was privy to the plans Naruto had sketched out. He had given most his nights to it, drafting possibilities, discussing them with her first, then Shikamaru, discarding the ones that had too many objections, and starting again. They had gone through many plans, some more thought out than others, until they arrived at what Naruto and Shikamaru between them thought might be their only shot. Shikamaru had advised Naruto to keep the plan under his belt until all other options were exhausted, but the way things were going, it seemed they were approaching that point faster than Shikamaru had feared even in a worst case scenario.

"If that is how you feel, then I have a proposal," Naruto said.

The feudal lords did not move and did not speak. Still, Hinata could see their feelings in the tiniest of movements—a hitch in the breath, a small turn at the mouth. She could tell that this reaction surprised them. She observed them surreptitiously. By their reactions, they had prepared to come here only to refuse the Hokage anything he might ask for. Perhaps they expected anger, maybe even threats, but not a proposal.

Naruto cleared his throat. "Shinobi *are* industrious. The skills we have developed may have been crafted for war, but they are useful for other things. We could be useful for other things."

"You want to turn assassins into craftsmen?" Lord Daichi said with a frown.

"Sort of," Naruto said. "Superior craftsman. Architects, medics, communicators, many things. We know how to work together and we can develop jutsu that-"

Lord Daichi waved a hand. "It's not necessary to explain. I think I understand. It is a radical idea. Perhaps too radical. So much change will be resisted."

"Things have already changed radically," Shikamaru interjected. He had said little the entire meeting, so the lords' heads swung toward him in surprise when he spoke. Shikamaru didn't back down from those weighing stares. He talked as he always did, with a lazy air that nevertheless somehow seemed to penetrate to the core of the matter. "You've spent the last hour convincing us that things can't remain as they are. If you refuse Shinobi work, they will have to get work elsewhere. This will happen anyway. Why not profit from it? *Help* us train Shinobi in other work, more productive work as you see it. That way, we can keep the village together. Our readiness for battle will remain sharp, but we will expand our service offerings to be useful in these times of peace."

"It will take considerable resources to develop such a program," Lord Daichi said, still frowning. "The training of Shinobi in the art of war is an age worn process that goes deep into the bones of your people. Perhaps your younger generation will adapt, but the older generation? By all reports, they have trouble enough just accepting the peace. It will be a long while, and a great investment, to change things enough to make the effort worth it."

"That's true," Shikamaru said. "But you will not be wasting money, as you see it, on training people for tasks that do not exist. If successful, this program would benefit the whole country. Shinobi would be more efficient at many tasks than others you might hire."

If successful.

That was the crux. The proposed project might fail. And then, instead of a slowly shrinking village, there would be an army of angry, bitter, disenfranchised ninja. Shinobi were dangerous enough already. What Naruto was proposing might be considered too dangerous to pursue. Naruto didn't want to believe it, but it was possible that the Feudal Lords didn't really want Shinobi anymore, or at least not so many of them.

It was the lords' turn to be silent for several moments, considering what Shikamaru had said.

"This is your proposal, Hokage?" Lord Daichi asked Naruto.

"It is," Naruto said firmly. "I will stand behind it. I will be responsible if it fails."

" *We* will be responsible, I'm afraid," Lord Hiroki grumbled. "Your conviction is noted, and necessary, but if you fail, the repercussions will be ours to bear."

Naruto didn't refute this. Hinata understood too. If the effort failed, the blame would fall to Naruto. But it would be the Land of Fire that would pay the price. The silence held.

"Your proposal is risky," Lord Daichi said finally, "but not without promise. We will relay it to the Daimyo. Perhaps a compromise can be reached."

Hinata released a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding.

Lightning manipulation was every bit as hard as Sakura had promised—harder perhaps. Itachi found fire natural in comparison, and he remembered how hard he had thought it was to learn at first.

Sakura began by making Itachi run laps, continuously. She wouldn't tell him why. All she said was to keep running, and to run evenly, until he could complete each lap in exactly the same amount of time as the previous one, down to the second. Doing that with the weights was particularly difficult, though Itachi didn't mention them.

While Itachi ran, Sakura coached Amaya on how to extend her white star jutsu to a long range attack, and Haru was practicing something on slugs (he had a barrel of them beside him) that made Itachi feel queasy.

When Itachi was able to run like a metronome, each step hitting the ground in an even beat, and each lap taking the same number of steps, he was allowed to stop, but only to move to the next part. Sakura sat him down and asked him to feed his chakra into a loop with the same timing and precision he had learned with his body while running laps. This was not nearly as physically tiring as running, but it made Itachi feel dizzy. However, he thought he understood what he was being taught, so he practiced it without complaint.

Sakura was teaching him to mold his chakra into a live current.

By afternoon, Itachi was sweating bullets, but he was also starting to get it. He could feel a sizzle in his chakra and knew that he only needed to spark it to create lightning. Sakura wouldn't let him. She

complimented his progress, but was told the final step would have to wait until the next day.

"You're overwrought," she said. "You're learning remarkably fast, but don't push it, or you'll injure yourself and undo all the progress you've made. And don't tell Sasuke about this."

"Why not? Isn't lightning Sasuke's affinity element? He might-"

Sakura interrupted him. "I don't think Sasuke will be pleased to learn that I'm teaching it to you," she said.

Itachi thought about that. Maybe Sakura had a point. It was obvious that Sasuke didn't want Itachi to learn lightning. He had begrudgingly taught him fire because it was his affinity element, then speed because it was necessary… adding lightning to that might be too much. Itachi supposed that Sasuke didn't want Itachi to resemble him too much; lightning was *his* thing.

Sakura looked severely troubled. "Actually, I'm not sure you should train with him today at all."

Itachi blinked at her. "Why?"

She took a deep breath. "He's had a rough time," she said. "I know that Naruto…visited him… this morning. I don't want him to take his feelings out on you."

Itachi looked away from her face. It was painful to hear Sakura say that he should be worried about *Sasuke's* rough times, given her circumstances. It was plain to see she still cared about him… perhaps more than she cared about herself.

"I have to," Itachi told her. "He'll think I'm a quitter if I don't show up. But I won't tell him about the lightning training if you think I shouldn't."

Sakura looked worried, but she didn't try to stop him.

Itachi thought about the situation as he walked from his first training session with Sakura to his second with Sasuke. They should be working together, he thought. They should *be* together. He hadn't realized how much sense they made as a pair until they weren't anymore. Sasuke needed someone like Sakura. With the way things were now, he felt a bit like a rag caught between two dogs.

Still, there was an upside. Between Sasuke teaching him speed and Sakura teaching him lightning control, he might be able to learn Chidori after all. That pleased him, even if the technique was useless without a Sharingan. He thought it would have made more sense for Sasuke to have taught him lightning, but he saw Sakura's point: Sasuke was too stubborn. Itachi had asked repeatedly for Chidori training, and when Sasuke responded at all, it was with refusal.

He wondered if some of the reason Sakura had agreed to teach him lightning manipulation was in order to spite Sasuke…or perhaps just to force him to see how similar his and Itachi's abilities were. That both pleased him and made him uneasy. Maybe it really was better if he didn't mention it.

When he arrived at the training grounds, he found Sasuke waiting for him. He stopped, surprised by what he saw.

His uncle looked like the waking dead. He stood at a half tilt in the middle of the grass. His eyes had a haunted look to them, as if he hadn't slept in ages.

There were no greetings.

"Prepare," was all Sasuke said when Itachi approached. Sasuke didn't even ask if he was still wearing his weights before he attacked.

Itachi barely blocked the first punch, eyes wide. The second caught him in the side of the head. He went down in a tumble, ears ringing.

"You have to be ready," Sasuke told him. There was no emotion in his voice. His eyes were Sharingan red, triple black pupils watching

him intently. "Again."

Itachi scrambled to his feet, staying low to the ground to give himself what advantage he could over Sasuke's height.

Sasuke came right at him, a kunai knife gleaming darkly in his fist. Itachi whipped his own kunai into his hand from its holster. He was proud of how quickly and smoothly he armed himself, but his pleasure was short-lived. Sasuke's blade was a feint, and Itachi's attempt to parry it caught only air. Sasuke vanished in front of him. So fast!

He felt Sasuke behind him, and turned, only to see that Sasuke's hands blurring through a sequence of signals. He was mere feet from Itachi's face.

" *Katon. Gokakyu No Jutsu!"*

As a billow of fire erupted from Sasuke's mouth, Itachi dropped his kunai, his hands shaking with the seconds he had to form the seals for his own Great Fireball Jutsu before he was scorched. He drew air into his lungs, holding it in, mingling it with his chakra, and released it in a rush.

" *Katon. Gokakyu No Jutsu!"*

The flame was weaker than he was capable of, but his jutsu was successful enough to form a shield. Sasuke's fire ate up the oxygen in the air between them, but it faltered against Itachi's flame. Both jutsus were extinguished in a blinding light.

Dry-mouthed, lungs burning, eyes tearing, Itachi searched frantically for Sasuke, who seemed to have disappeared from where he stood just seconds before the flames. He found his uncle off to his left, charging at him from the side. Itachi leapt backward, kicking hard and using chakra propulsion to boost his ascent from the ground. It only bought him time, and not much of it.

Sasuke came on him like an avalanche. Two, four, then six kunai knives came into his hands, held between the fingers. Itachi formed the Tiger sign for a clone jutsu, not knowing how else to dodge so many. He stared at Sasuke as he charged, counting the paces between them, knowing it was imperative to get the timing right. All he could see were Sasuke's eyes, the Sharingan's three pointed wheel seeming to turn as he stared at them. Itachi's chakra faltered before that gaze and he lost his grip on the jutsu. The clone fell apart. Cursing, he leapt backward again, but Sasuke caught him in midair, snatching him by the shirt, and threw him to the ground.

The ground disappeared when he hit.

He was falling through darkness. No. Feathers. A sea of black crow feathers. When his body touched them, they exploded, careening in all directions and turning into birds, each with a Sharingan eye that glowered at him malignantly.

Genjutsu? he thought wildly. When had that happened? After the kunai knives? Before? During? It didn't matter. Sakura's training came to him. He concentrated on his chakra flow and formed the seal of release. He wasn't *really* forming the seal. His body wasn't really here at all. But he believed in the seal, and the place where his body was, where there were no feathers. *That* was reality. With an effort, Itachi stopped his chakra flow. His body was really…

He made his chakra surge like the crack of a whip. The feathers vanished. He was lying on his back in the grass, staring into blue sky overcast with wisps of white. The wind had been knocked out of him so that he was wheezing. Sasuke must have really caught and thrown him. He thought longingly of Sakura's healing as he tried to sit up.

The sound that came ringing to his ears was distinctive. It was high-pitched and piercing, whining like a whirling buzz saw cutting through a metal beam … like thousands of tiny birds…birds twittering in a panic. White blue light flashed above his head.

Alarmed, Itachi rolled, heedless of the pain in his body, and was on his feet just in time to see lightning lance out across the ground where he had been lying unconscious just seconds before.

Sasuke was on him in a second, his fist still blazing with Chidori.

An assassin's technique , Itachi thought in disbelieving, distracted amazement. He ducked, his body twisting automatically to avoid the blow, and formed the seal for a substitution jutsu. He expelled his chakra and skirted behind a tree just as Sasuke's fist slammed into the space where his body had been.

Chidori ripped the trunk of the tree into pieces.

Itachi was still close enough to feel the aftershock of the lightning. He collapsed to his knees, his body ringing like a struck bell. He tasted blood on his lip where he had almost bit through it.

"Are you trying to *kill* me?" Itachi shouted.

His body ached, throbbing deep in the tissues. He stumbled as he got to his feet, shaking.

Sasuke's face was like granite. "If you can't take it, then give up. No one is keeping you here."

Itachi panted, sucking air into his lungs until his throat burned. "I'm not giving up! But don't… tell me… this is…. training!" He stopped, managing his breath, and then looked up with watering eyes. "You're clearly just trying to hurt me!"

Sasuke seemed transfixed in the spot. He stared at Itachi with blood red Sharingan eyes that burned.

"Why?" Itachi demanded. "Why do you hate me *so* much?"

Sasuke didn't answer.

"Is it my father? You hate him, so you can't stand me?"

The Sharingan faded from Sasuke's eyes. He turned slowly. "What do you want?" he asked, his voice devoid of emotion. "I thought it was clear that I would train you for this match and that would be all. We agreed—"

"I know!" Itachi shouted. He wanted to tear his hair out. He couldn't remember the last time he had burst like this. "I know what we agreed on, but it's like you don't even *see* me when you look at me. How are you supposed to train me if you don't know who I am? All you do is kick me around. I want you to *see* me!"

Sasuke looked at him. Itachi drew himself up, pushing back his emotions. He wiped the blood from his lip.

"I see you better than you think," Sasuke said. He stared at Itachi with the Sharingan, and Itachi stepped back before it. "You look like my brother. You look like him, but you don't act like him. You aren't him. I see that."

Itachi was quiet, but he felt angry. He knew what this was really about. "I hate what you did to Sakura."

Sasuke's eyes hardened. "Don't talk to me about Sakura."

"Why not?"

"It's none of your concern. You don't know anything."

"She's my sensei. She came to my house. And I just came from training with her. She's teaching me… " He paused, considering the consequences, but he reasoned that if Sasuke came to the match, he would find out anyway. "She's teaching me lightning manipulation."

Sasuke didn't reply, but he looked piqued…and troubled.

"You really hurt her," Itachi accused, "and I care because…" He licked his lips. The bottom one that he had bit was swelling. It tasted

like metal. The pain made him bold. "I think you need Sakura. She loves you. If she's really having your child-"

"That's none of your business."

"It'll be my cousin!"

Sasuke seemed momentarily started by this statement. Then he glared. "I don't want to talk about this."

"Of *course* you don't," Itachi replied. "You never do. You think I don't get it? Well, I do. I understand. I've lived with it my whole life. Silence. Sadness. Pain. Secrets. You're just like my mother. You are obviously hurting, but it's not my business. I'm not supposed to notice or remark upon it, but-" He wasn't even sure who he was talking about anymore. He just kept talking, saying all the things he had been thinking for ages. "—but I *see* it, everyday, and I don't know what to do, except work hard to please you and pretend I *don't* see. It's just…sometimes I think it doesn't have to be that way. This family is… It's—"

"We aren't family."

"Fine!" Itachi said, throwing up his hands. "Have it your way. You're my only connection to my father and that whole *half* of who I am, but if you don't care, then fine. I won't intrude on you anymore. It doesn't change the facts."

He picked up the kunai knife he had dropped and tucked it away. Then he turned and started to walk.

"Where are you going?" Sasuke demanded.

"Home," Itachi shouted over his shoulder. "Like I said, you obviously aren't training me anymore. If beating me up is all you're interested in, then there's no more reason to be here. I'm not going to stand around just to get pummeled. I can't. I need to be functional for the match. Thanks, uncle. Thanks for everything up until now."

He walked away, taking long strides measured to his anger. He was halfway out of the field when Sasuke seized him by the arm. The speed and stealth with which Sasuke had closed the distance spooked Itachi into silence again. He stood completely still, twisting to look at Sasuke's face. The Sharingan was gone, but his uncle's face still terrified him.

"Forfeit," Sasuke said.

"What?"

"Forfeit the match."

"I can't."

Sasuke's eyes hardened. "You're not bad for a Genin, tremendously improved from where you started, but Yukio is a true Shinobi. He will give you no quarter. You can't beat him. Forfeit the match."

Itachi stared. "I can't forfeit," he said. "I have to fight, even if I lose. If I don't, I will never be accepted as a Shinobi."

"Why do you want to be?"

"I—"

"You could have a better life."

Itachi was stunned into speechlessness. Sasuke wanted him to have a *better* life?

"Your family has money," Sasuke pressed. "You could do anything. Be anything."

"My *mother* has money. Half my blood is Uchiha."

Sasuke looked like he wanted to throttle him. "You can choose. Why choose Uchiha? The Shinobi life is hard. You don't understand how hard it can be."

Sasuke's tone was so cold, so matter-of-fact that Itachi felt afraid of its portent, but in his uncle's eyes he could see his own reflection, and his own black eyes, looking back into Sasuke's. "Why do you say that? What is it about the Uchiha? You wear the family sigil and everyone knows you are proud to be one. I know my father killed everyone in your clan, but-"

"The Uchiha sickness goes beyond my brother. It was there before he was born. It should die with me."

"Is that what you told Sakura? Is that why you rejected your child?"

His uncle was silent.

"What are you going to do?" Itachi demanded. "If you feel that strongly about the Uchiha line ending with you, what are you going to do? There's me, and my sister, and your child. Are you going to kill all of us?"

"No," Sasuke said roughly.

"You think you can shut us out like we don't exist?"

"You don't share the name. You don't need to have anything to do with it. That child will be a Haruno."

"Why shouldn't we all be Uchiha?"

"You don't know the history of the Sharingan. It is a history soaked in blood. You do *not* want to be a part of that. You do not want to be in my family."

Itachi set his face stubbornly. "I carry the Sharingan gene whether I answer to the Uchiha name or not. It's there, somewhere, even if I'm not good enough to activate it yet. I am your blood. I would rather understand. I would rather be guided."

Sasuke's eyes burned. His grip on Itachi's arm tightened to painfulness.

"You want Uchiha guidance? Then listen to me," his uncle seethed. "The Sharingan is not just a tool. It is a dark power, a cursed power. It does not activate from skill or training. It is activated by pain and fear and death. You want a Sharingan? I'll tell you the secret. All you have to do is be willing to kill your enemy. Do you have killing intent, *nephew* ? Do you?"

Itachi couldn't answer. Sasuke's eyes were an abyss drawing him in. He couldn't look away.

"If you want more power," his uncle whispered, "if you want a Mangekyou Sharingan, all you have to do is kill someone you love—your teammates perhaps, or your mother. And if you want to keep that power, leave your sister alive and provoke her to do the same. Then take her eyes."

Itachi recoiled. The revulsion he felt was so deep he could scarcely form words. "That…that's what my father is?"

"That's what *Uchiha* is."

Itachi trembled. Staring into his uncle's eyes, he saw just how deep the blackness really went. He stared into them again, and he saw his own reflection again, and his own eyes again, and how repulsed he looked. Sasuke's words raced through his mind in circles. "Did…did my father try to take your eyes?"

The response was quiet, like death. "I took his."

Itachi felt panic surge up from deep inside him. The eyes staring at him, the ones he had often reflected looked so much like his, they were… He couldn't finish the thought. He felt like he was going to be sick. Dizzy and disoriented, he pulled on his arm. "Let me go."

His uncle didn't release him. Itachi could see that the hand that clasped him was shaking.

"Please," Itachi gasped, frantic to be free. "I understand! Let me go!"

Sasuke's hand opened. "Go," he whispered.

Itachi ran.

He pelted through the woods at breakneck speed, sucking in cold air until his lungs burned and his throat was ragged. He wasn't really seeing anything around him.

He almost slammed into Rina.

She appeared out of nowhere, stepping out from behind a tree.

"Rina," he gasped. "What are you doing out here?"

There was nothing out here. Nothing except him and Sasuke.

He realized the answer to his question without Rina having to speak. She had been watching.

"Did you hear?" he demanded. "Did you see?"

He wanted to hug her, to make sure she was real, and that she was safe, but he didn't. He didn't touch her. He didn't come close to her. He just stared at her face, at her eyes, thinking of what Sasuke had said. His sister's eyes were black as coal, framed by long black lashes like raven feathers. They looked like a prettier version of his, just like… He couldn't finish the thought. He prayed she had not heard. He couldn't imagine… but it didn't seem likely. Sasuke had barely said it loud enough for Itachi to hear.

"Itachi," she whispered. Her voice trembled.

"Do you come out here every day?" he demanded. "Mom will be furious with you! Go home!"

She didn't move. She lowered her eyes to the ground between her feet. "Will you train with me?"

"Rina, I can't. I've a ton to learn and I've only got two days to do it. After the match, I'll-"

She raised her eyes slowly. She spoke in a whisper. "I can show you how to do Chidori."

TBC

A/N

review. Nothing makes me happier than reviews. I can live off of reviews. I love reviews. I especially love long reviews. But even a short review lets me know that at least you are reading. I have no other way of knowing.

I am going out of town for the Fourth of July, and I won't have a cell phone signal, but whenever I do, I am going to drain my battery in an effort to check my email. Because I love reviews. Lovely, long, thoughtful, wonderful reviews. Ahhhhh….. so nice. Like cupcakes.

Things/Scenes to review this chapter (in case you forgot, since it is quite long)

1. Sakura talks to Ino/Lucia

2. Naruto vs Sasuke

3. Yukio & Team Four

4. Sakura's training

4. Lucia vs. Grass

5. Naruto vs. Feudal Lords

6. Itachi vs. Sasuke.

7. Rina

A big thank you to last chapter's reviewers! I read all of them—multiple times!

Disneytiger, Irui, hymnia, MelissaKS, T0FU (thanks for reviewing both chapters!), meantimegirl, AnimeCoupleLover61, reality_deviant, bibsa1, Once in Always, Kirk, moochiesan, the TumTum tree, Girness, Fireyflyy, Alien She, Stumbleine8, Andrina, Crimson Marionette, xxPiggyBankxx, DeepPoeticGirl, Zankaru Zelladonii, Lifestyle, seleneswan, bells-mannequin, lily, Yonis, Sharon, ambergu-pyon96, Dionysos, Suki dah Turdle, Unintentional Liar, Cheetay, Derrand59, Livvy22, Jadeflower, , Delbi18, mirette, SectumSemprae, drabbleocity, Nagashi, Ylan, Autumnlady, minniemousemom, shkh4ever, -00-night-eyes-00-, ironbutterfly25, Ishq, Insaneteacup, ijpowers92, Tenshii 1001, satoshii, MizuiroNeko, Twisted Musalih, hardblackbubble, Nitramy, Reignashii, pockybandits89, Common Sense, tearsofjoy159, Selina Reije Hyuuga, IVIaedhros

There were many new names! Hope you keep reading. Also people I DIDN'T hear from. Still reading?

Chapter 18

It took a really long time to write this chapter. In my defense, it's over 19,000 words. And half of it is straight fighting—which (as people who write action know) is flippin' hard. I needed to take breaks from it just because it was really difficult to put together. All the encouraging reviews I got along the way were helpful as they motivate me to write. Thank you very much!

NOTE: I will admit in advance that the abilities of the Genin are a bit over-the-top…but it also makes it more fun. Enjoy.

Warnings : This fanfic is for 16+ readers (rated M). It contains sexual references , mature themes (including sado-masochism...described vaguely but not "shown"), some violence, a very little bit of swearing, and other material. , This fic FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES for this site so please do not report it as MA. There are no explicit sex scenes. All such scenes "cut off" before anything happens. Violence is present as this is a story about ninjas but it's not the type that is meant to disturb and horrify (like a horror movie).

White Rain

Chapter 18

By Zapenstap

Itachi stared at his sister uncomprehendingly. "What do you mean you can teach me Chidori?"

Rina met his eyes. Itachi looked into them, black pools like his own, like Sasuke's… like…His heart hammered so hard it frightened him.

Rina's expression didn't change. There was a tough, stubborn look on her face. She was serious.

"Show me," he said. "But somewhere else." He glanced nervously over his shoulder, wondering if Sasuke was still standing where Itachi had left him. His uncle's last words rang in his mind.

You want a Sharingan? I'll tell you the secret. All you have to do is be willing to kill your enemy. If you want more power, kill someone you love—your teammates perhaps, or your mother. And if you want to keep that power, leave your sister alive and provoke her to do the same. Then take her eyes.

He grabbed Rina's hand. "Let's get out of here," he said.

He began to walk quickly, making strides that normally would have made Rina whine at him to slow down. But she didn't say anything. She kept up, her hand tightening around his, until they were running together.

When they broke out from under the tree cover, sunlight bathed Itachi's face, dashing away the darkness and warming the cold chill that seemed to have frozen his heart. Sasuke was far behind them, somewhere deep in the woods. Itachi stopped, closing his eyes and forcing himself to breathe. He felt dizzy.

"This way," Rina said, and tugged on his arm. He looked at her. She was dressed in ninja training gear—midnight blue arm guards and matching v-neck shirt with a gray flap skirt and black leggings—but she was just Rina to him. Her forehead damp with sweat from exertion, but her eyes were bright, her face beaming. "Come with me, Itachi."

Frowning, he followed his sister.

Rina led him down trails and through fields, moving as swiftly and as silently as a deer. He watched her with amazement, noting how deftly and quietly she leapt fallen logs, climbed steep slopes, and wended her way between trees and through undergrowth.

"Rina," he said. "I thought you were failing Academy."

She didn't answer. She turned to face him, a finger raised to his lips, and glanced to the right.

Itachi closed his mouth, listening. Distantly, he heard the clash of kunai knives and the roar of ninjutsu. He looked around in bewilderment. Were they passing near training grounds? Itachi hadn't known there were any out here. But then, he largely stuck to the Genin grounds. Maybe it was Chuunin or even Jounin he was hearing.

Rina kept enough distance from the sounds that they didn't stumble into anybody accidentally. Itachi didn't see anyone at all, not even a flash of color or movement in the distance. After a few minutes, the sounds faded away and all was quiet around them except for the bugs and the birds.

"Where are we going?" he asked as they crossed an empty meadow. "What's wrong with right here?"

"Too close to the sentries," she said, and ducked into a grove of trees just ahead.

Itachi followed more slowly, looking behind him at the high waving grass and gently sloping land. He didn't see any sentries. He hadn't even known there *were* sentries, though he supposed there must be. Still, that meant they were close to the outskirts of Konoha. How did she know where the sentries were?

"Come on," Rina called from up ahead.

He quickened his pace, thoughts racing.

Was this what Rina did all day? Explore? He thought about her wandering the village grounds alone. She must have spent hours and hours just walking around for her to know the terrain so well. They used to do this kind of thing together. The thought made him feel terrible. How lonely and bored she must be.

At the edge of the meadow, Rina stopped. They stood side by side in front of a thicket.

"Is this it?" he asked. The trees grew so close together that the foliage on the branches was a solid mass of green and brown.

Rina lifted what Itachi had thought was a tangle of branches of leaves. There were real branches, but they weren't attached to the trunks of the trees. They had been woven together with grass and string and came away together as one piece. Behind them was an opening. Rina ducked into it.

Itachi had to crouch to fit beneath the low arch. He followed Rina through a tunnel of bushes and bracken, maneuvering uncomfortably until he found himself emerging into the open.

He rose to his full height, staring around at a wide clearing surrounded on all sides by trees and bushes too dense to see through. The space was at least a hundred feet at its widest point, maybe longer, and the ground was a rich, soft loam. It would make a perfect secluded garden, but there was nothing growing except for one scraggly little tree with a twisted trunk, around which a few boulders were heaped in a pile.

Rina walked into the center of the clearing.

"What is this place?" he asked. "How did you find it?"

She shrugged. "People train here sometimes. There are lots of places like this."

He shook his head. She had probably followed someone, but it wouldn't do any good to ask her who. She wouldn't tell him. She might not even know who it was.

"Can you actually do Chidori?" he asked her.

Her gaze flickered to the ground between her feet. "Sort of."

"Show me," he said.

She formed three hand signs in smooth succession: Ox. Rabbit. Monkey.

"I can't do it properly," she warned him.

But she could *do* it.

He watched as his sister's chakra sparked with lightning. She did that part almost effortlessly, but she wore an expression of severe concentration as she spun her chakra tighter and tighter, shrinking it upon itself, condensing it into a tiny ball, smaller and smaller, until it suddenly crackled to life. The Chidori she clutched in her palm was not much bigger than a walnut. The sound of it was more like the chirp of a single sparrow than a thousand birds. But it was a Chidori.

Rina closed her fist and the jutsu vanished.

"Where did you learn that?" he asked her.

"I watched Sasuke."

"You watched—"

He cut himself off, counting how many times he had seen Sasuke do Chidori. Unless Rina was watching him practice alone, it couldn't have been more than a few times.

But she had done that with the great fireball jutsu too.

"How do you do that?" he asked her. "How do you pick up jutsu just by watching?"

She didn't answer.

Itachi sighed. He probably shouldn't have bothered. Rina couldn't explain how she could play piano either. It was just something she did. She could play a sonata before she could speak in full

sentences. She had a special understanding of music. Maybe it was the same with chakra. Perhaps she was a sensor type? Itachi had read about them, but had never met one.

"Your Chidori wouldn't be effective as an attack," he told her. "It's too small."

"I can't make it very big or hold it very long because I'm not very fast."

"Is lighting your affinity element?" he asked her.

"We did the test in school. I got the crumpled paper. That's where I got the idea."

"That you could learn Chidori?"

She nodded.

That was very Rina. She could. So she did.

He sighed. "Rina, that's amazing, but if you figured out how to make a Chidori, even a mosquito-sized one, all by yourself, why are you failing your classes?"

"I'm not failing now," she said. She looked away when she said it. It came out a mumble.

"Rina," he said. "Come on. You know what I mean. You *were* failing, and would still be now if mom didn't catch you at it. I know you must have done it on purpose. You knew the right answers to those tests, didn't you? Why would you put down the wrong answers?"

She looked away. He detected sullenness in the profile of her face, her lower lip jutting out and her eyebrows drawn down. She didn't want to tell him. That was plain. But he had *asked* , and he knew his sister. Rina was awfully good at keeping secrets, but she nearly always answered questions that were asked of her directly. At first, he worried that she was going to go into one of her black moods, in

which she sank into a silent sulk and was completely impossible, but instead her face began to wobble. A moment later tears flowed down her cheeks and chin like rainwater. She wouldn't look at him.

Now, he felt bad. He always did when she cried, even when he was mystified as to the reason. "Rina, don't cry. I'm not yelling at you. I just don't understand. What were you thinking?"

She crouched where she stood, scrubbing at her eyes and hiccupping every second or third word. "You….work so… *hard* , and I… I thought you would…hate me… if …" Her words disintegrated into unintelligible sobs.

Itachi flushed. His cheeks and the back of his neck felt like they were burning. She failed because of *him* ? She failed because she thought he would *hate* her if she did well? Of all the possible reasons, that had never occurred to him.

He approached her and knelt so she could see his face. She refused to look at him, even when he pulled her arms away from her face so she couldn't hide behind them. "Rina, listen to me. I don't want you to fail. I'll be proud of you no matter how much trouble I'm having. I want you do your best. Okay?"

At first, she didn't respond. He wasn't quite sure she believed him, but he could see that she was processing what he said. He waited, and after a few seconds, she nodded. When she finally recovered enough to actually look at him, her eyes were still wet and shining with emotion. "Itachi," she whispered.

"Yes?"

"If you're proud of me, why don't you ever want to do anything with me anymore?"

"I'm just busy, Rina."

She looked unconvinced. He supposed she had a right. He *had* blown her off more than once. And she *was* a little embarrassing with the way she followed him around everywhere, even wanting to watch him train with his teammates. He took a deep breath.

"Okay, Rina, look. I *am* busy, but I'm also getting older and I want to make my own friends and not just be friends with you. But that doesn't mean I don't like you or that I don't want to spend time with you. You're my sister. Of course I want to do things with you too."

She didn't say anything to that, but she looked a little less sullen.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "Since Sasuke and I are done today, you can have me all afternoon, okay?"

"But you only have two days to train."

"I know, but you can train me, right? You can train me to make a Chidori?"

The darkness lifted from her face. "Can I show you something first?"

He was puzzled. "Sure."

Rina rose and scampered toward the scraggly tree sprouting by the pile of boulders. At the base of the tree, she squatted and rolled away a rock that was nearly the size of her head. Under the rock there was a hole in the ground. She crouched beside it and reached in.

Itachi watched, completely mystified, as she withdrew a rectangular object wrapped in leaves and bound with string. She removed the bindings and brushed off the leaves.

"You buried your notebook?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"Why?"

She held it out to him.

Was this what she wanted to show him? He took it from her slowly, frowning, and flipped it open.

The pages were covered with music. The notes were penciled in on staff lines denoted with the treble clef, but Itachi didn't recognize any melodies. He turned the pages. They were all the same. There was a short tune at the top of every page, some very short, starting and ending in just a few notes, while others were longer. He hummed a couple, but they didn't sound like anything. Under the notes there were more staff lines, and notes that were even more garbled, not even musical, like an idiot wrote it. The counts were inconsistent too. Sometimes the bars seemed unfinished, with just two or three notes per bar, even in a four beat measure, which wasn't like Rina. Some of the notations made even less sense.

"What is this?" he asked her.

"Not a song," she said.

He eyed her with a smirk. That was a challenge if he had ever heard one. Her eyes were bright as she watched him. She wanted him to figure it out, whatever it was.

He remembered that she had told him she was working on a code before she hadn't discovered any secrets to record. Was this her code? Were these her secrets?

He flipped to the very front page. Here he did recognize something. It was the chromatic scale, twelve notes drawn on the treble clef. He stared at for a moment, wondering why she had written something so obvious. It must be a clue of some kind.

"Can I think about this?" he asked her, hefting the notebook.

She nodded.

Itachi smiled at her. "So," he said. "Chidori?"

She beamed at him.

He knew he couldn't use the jutsu for the match, but he didn't think it would be a waste of effort to learn it. If nothing else, it would improve his lightning control. And besides, it had been a long time he had seen Rina look so happy.

The day of the match dawned bright and clear. The only clouds in the sky were like bits of cotton that had been stretched and pulled apart, drifting lazily over the arena.

The energy on the ground was quite different.

Ino observed from her seat in the high boxes as people poured into the arena. Since the rebuilding of Konoha, the arena had been remodeled with more seating than in her days as a Genin , so that the arena was surrounded on all sides like a coliseum. It was rarely full, but today, Shinobi, students, villagers, and outliers jostling for space spilled in, filling up rows of bleachers from dirt to sky. And still more kept coming. The buzz of conversation in the air resembled the swarm of a great hive.

With a little coin, a little sweet talk, and some bullying, Ino had managed to snag an entire box. The boxes were the best seats in the house, extending over the heads of the crowd below and within leaping distance of the arena. Ino wasn't abashed at having to fight a little dirty to get one.

Her box was just to the left of the Officiator's box, which was located dead center and reserved for the Hokage and his guests. Ino's box had individual seating for nine, though she was currently the only one there. She had come early with the baby to get settled, knowing how quickly it would turn into a zoo. The other seats were reserved for Chouji, Lucia, Lucia's daughter Rina, and four members of the old crew. Not everyone had accepted her invitation. Kiba was on a

mission and Hinata and Shikamaru were both sitting with Naruto. That left Neji, Tenten, Lee, and Shino to keep her company. The remaining seat was for Sasuke, who hadn't responded to her invitation at all.

She was fussing with the shade cover on her baby's bassinet when Naruto arrived. He was dressed in his Hokage robes, but did not wear the hat. He plunked himself down in the middle of the box adjacent to Ino's, his arms crossed, looking grumpy, while Hinata—dressed in a soft, but striking civilian's purple kimono and sandals, a flower in her hair—seated herself more gracefully on his left. Shikamaru followed into the box after the Hokage, reclining in the seat to Hinata's left.

"Shikamaru!" she called, waving brightly.

Shikamaru turned his head toward her. "Hey," he said. "Where's Chouji?"

"Getting snacks."

Shikamaru smiled.

"You should sit over here," Ino suggested. "We've got an extra seat."

"I wish I could," Shikamaru admitted, "but Naruto needs me close. The Feudal Lords are going to be sitting with us."

Ino nodded her understanding. Hinata glanced at her and smiled one of her timid smiles. Ino smiled back. Shikamaru wasn't the only one keeping an eye on things for Naurto.

"Who was supposed to fill your empty seat?" Shikamaru asked her. "You're never short of friends."

"I invited Sasuke," Ino said. "He didn't respond. I don't even know if he's coming."

"Sasuke's here," Shikamaru informed her. "We saw him when we came in."

Ino blinked. She wasn't sure how to feel about that. She supposed she was glad Sasuke had come. It was his nephew fighting after all, and he had trained the boy himself, but it irked her also. Why didn't he *tell* anyone he was coming? He hadn't bothered to respond to her invite and it was apparent that he wasn't sitting with Naruto. Sasuke was so *confusing* .

"Where's he sitting?" she asked.

"No idea," Shikamaru said with a shrug. "We barely caught a glimpse of him. He's been avoiding Naruto. Why do you think our Hokage looks so grumpy?"

Ino wanted to laugh. She could think of a dozen reasons why Naruto might be grumpy, but Sasuke was certainly not an uncommon cause!

"At least he's here," Naruto interjected. "I'd pound him if he didn't show up!"

Ino didn't doubt it, but she hid her mirth lest she incite Naruto further. She was saved from having to respond by the arrival of Tenten, Neji, and Lee, who took their seats in the row below Ino, leaving room on Ino's left for Lucia's family. Chouji and Shino followed a few moments later, both of them laden with bags full of snacks, which they passed around.

Ino was chatting with Tenten when the Feudal Lords arrived at Naruto's box. Ino eyed them sideways as she talked, noting that Tenten had noticed them too. They both quieted, smiling at each other, and while pretending to admire one another's clothes, watched the conversation taking place in the adjacent box.

"Perhaps you can tell us more about this match," Lord Daichi was saying. "We've only heard rumors."

"What rumors?" Shikamaru asked.

"That you let an outsider into the ranks," Lord Hiroki said. He was looking at Naruto. "And that the boy who is being challenged is fighting to defend that decision."

Naruto twisted his torso to face the Feudal Lords. Although his back was to Ino and Tenten, Ino could imagine the piercing quality of his bright, blue eyes, which she knew from experience could be either inspiring or unnerving depending on what he said to you. "The boy is the son of a Shinobi," Naruto said. "His mother brought him here. I did not see it fit to deny him his father's heritage."

"It's not unheard of," Shikamaru added.

"Not common, though," Lord Daichi said. He was frowning.

"The rumors say that the boy is an Uchiha child," Lord Hiroki added, "but that he lacks the gift. Is that true?"

"His father was Itachi Uchiha," Naruto said, "but Sasuke is the last of that name." He sounded so sad about that that Ino's heart went out to him. "The boy goes by his mother's family name."

Lord Daichi grunted. "We don't bring it up to meddle in Shinobi politics," he said. "It is has always been your right to train who you like, as you like, in the Shinobi arts. We find the situation odd, but I am looking forward to seeing this match. Perhaps it will give us a gauge as to whether this new generation is as promising as you have intimated."

Naruto did not respond.

Ino raised her eyebrows at Tenten, wondering what that was about.

"Have these Feudal Lords even seen a match?" Tenten whispered to her. "Ever?"

"I think I remember seeing Lord Daichi from one of the exhibition matches last year," Ino replied. "The younger one, though…I'm not sure."

"This will be different than an exhibition," Tenten said, "though you wouldn't know it to look at the crowd. I can't believe how many people are here for this! You'd think it was the Chuunin exams."

Ino didn't disagree. Genin matches usually drew few onlookers. Sometimes, when a Genin challenged another Genin, it was a private affair—just the teachers, interested classmates, an officiator, and perhaps some family members. She had never seen a turnout like this. The pressure on poor Itachi must be overwhelming.

"Then again," Tenten said, "from what I know of Yukio, this might not be far off from the Chuunin exams."

Ino nodded. Young Yukio was probably eating it up. The village had been anticipating watching Yukio fight since he first entered the Academy. Natural talent like his was rare. It was a little odd actually that it had taken him so long to become a Genin.

"Why *isn't* he a Chuunin?" she asked Tenten.

"Oh, well part of it is emotional maturity," Tenten replied. "Yukio *asked* to be made Genin years ago, and probably would have progressed to Chuunin too, but Naruto wouldn't allow it. He doesn't want to follow the old ways of throwing students into missions before they're ready for the responsibility, even if they have the skills. And Yukio has real leadership potential. The other kids look up to him and his influence has a noticeable effect. Some are just born like that, you know? Naruto thought it best to cultivate him slowly and make sure he really understands what's expected of him. Yukio has taken advantage of it. I think he's got a lot in common with my old team actually."

"Tenten is most correct to say that Yukio has much in common with our old team," Rock Lee chimed in. "He does not just want to make it

to Jounin. No. His ambition is much higher. He wants renown."

Neji didn't say anything, but he nodded silently, agreeing with Lee.

"I remember when he was in my class," Tenten said. "Even when he was just a little kid, Yukio was always watching and constantly comparing himself to his classmates. He trains every day. He's been planning his premier for a long time."

Ino considered that. It must have upset Yukio when Itachi joined his class so unexpectedly—just some hitherto unknown kid from a far-off country rumored to have *Uchiha* blood. The rumors might have worried Yukio…until he realized how little Itachi knew about Shinobi arts. She could see why Yukio had challenged him, though it did seem a bit unfair. The odds were heavily stacked against Itachi winning the match. In fact, there were floating bets on how fast he would fold, even with the help of his team.

She was thinking about Itachi's chances when Lucia arrived at the box, her daughter in tow. Rina was wearing her Academy clothes, but Lucia was her usual self—understated elegance personified, her style as immaculate as it was refined. She wore a cowl-neck summer dress made of rich, expensive silk, an off-white color that complimented her ivory pale skin and accentuated her dark curls. Ino made a mental note to ask after the name of the dressmaker as she rose to greet her.

"Lucia!" she said with a smile. "We were just talking about the match. Neji, Lee, Tenten, you remember Lucia. Lucia, I know you know Tenten, Rina's teacher. And you've met Neji and Lee before too, though you may not remember. They escorted you into the village."

"I remember," Lucia said, inclining her head politely.

"Is Itachi with his team?" Ino asked her.

Lucia nodded as she seated herself beside Ino, Rina climbing up onto the bench beside her mother. Ino had noticed that Rina didn't

talk much, especially around people she didn't know well, but when Ino smiled at her, she smiled back.

"I heard you placed a bet with the Grass," Neji said to Lucia.

"I have."

Ino still couldn't believe it. She had almost swallowed her tongue when Lucia named the stake. The amount she had pledged was to the Grass *village* , not the envoys, but it was worth the price of half a dozen A-rank missions, upon which the average Jounin could live for a year. It was imprudent to bet that much money on a Genin match, especially when the odds were so stacked against a win, though Ino supposed she might have acted as bullheaded herself if someone had dared to insult her son the way the Grass had insulted Itachi.

"Does your son know you placed a bet on him?" Tenten asked Lucia, her brow furrowing with worry.

"No," Lucia said. "He has enough to worry about."

"What will you do if he loses?" Neji asked. "The Hokage will expect you to honor your debt to the Grass, even in the current situation. Don't expect Konoha to intercede for you."

"I will work out payment with the Grass if and when it comes to that," Lucia said. "To be frank, that is the least of my worries today."

Ino eyed her dubiously. As a banker, money was Lucia's business, so if Lucia said she wasn't worried about it, Ino saw no reason to worry for her. Perhaps she had some scheme in mind. She just hoped that Lucia's plan wasn't hedged on Itachi *winning* . Ino was rooting for Team Four, but still…

But Lucia's attention didn't appear to be anywhere except on the arena, though so far, it was empty except for the Jounin officiators making the rounds, checking the seals that were put in place to

protect the audience from the possibility of jutsu flying outside of the ring and into the stands.

Sighing, Ino leaned over the bassinet to check on her baby.

"What are *you* doing here?"

It was Lord Daichi's voice, shouted from the adjacent box. Ino had never imaged such a heated exclamation could come from that dusty old man.

For a moment, Ino thought he was shouting at *her* . Her whole body froze solid in confusion, but when she straightened, she saw that Lord Diachi's eyes weren't on her at all. It was Lucia beside her on whom the Feudal Lord's eyes were fixed. Ino had revealed her by leaning over. Lord Daichi must have chanced to look their way at that moment.

Everyone in her box fell dead silent. In Naruto's box, everyone was staring at the feudal lords in confusion. Shikamaru leaned over and whispered something in Naruto's ear. Naruto's eyebrows were lowered in an expression of perturbed concentration.

Lucia's expression was like marble. Ino was used to seeing that from her—everything suppressed tightly inside, like a sealed jar—but it had never been more frustrating.

It was clear that she *knew* the Feudal Lords. And they knew her.

"Daichi," Lucia murmured in greeting. "A pleasure to see you. And Hiroki. Is the Daimyo well?"

Hinata's eyes widened. Shikamaru's eyes narrowed.

"He would want an audience with you if he knew you were back in this country," Lord Daichi answered. "Why *are* you here?"

Lucia raised her eyebrows. "You didn't hear? I'm staying in Konoha."

"You're *staying* here?" Lord Daichi demanded. " *You?* "

Ino sensed impending pandemonium, but did not understand it. She shared bewildered looks with Chouji, who looked just as puzzled as she felt.

"My son is fighting in the match."

Lord Daichi's eyes looked like they were about to fall out of his head. Lord Hiroki's eyes darted between Lord Daichi and Lucia, his mouth hanging partly open.

"Hokage!" Lord Daichi exclaimed in a fierce whisper. "This can't be allowed. *This* woman's son can't be permitted to become a Shinobi."

"Can't?" Naruto asked quietly.

Ino licked her lips. Naruto was usually polite to the Feudal Lords. He respected them and their responsibilities, but Ino knew that there were times when he felt they overstepped their authority with him. Sometimes, they seemed to think that Shinobi were wholly subordinate to their will, when in fact the contract that existed between the Feudal Lords and Kages was one between equals...or was supposed to be. In times of war, the Feudal Lords had begged Konoha for help. In times of peace, when Shinobi powers slumbered, the balance of power was reversed.

Even so, there was such a thing as overstepping, and Lord Daichi's fury wavered before Naruto's penetrating blue stare. "It would be… inadvisable."

Naruto didn't blink. "How do you know Lucia?"

"She's—" But Lord Daichi stopped himself, tongue clicking against the roof of his mouth as he fell silent. His face was pale. "I must inform the Daimyo of this, Hokage. He will want to speak to you on the matter himself. For now, you *should* stop this match. "

Ino detected fear in the old lord. His energy was laced with it. Yet she couldn't quite understand what frightened him. Was it the way he felt the Daimyo would react to the news that Lucia's son was learning Shinobi arts? Or was it Lucia herself? The way Itachi might perform? Or the way Naruto asserted his authority on the subject?

A horn blew across the stadium.

"It's starting," Tenten said. "Look, the kids are coming out."

It was true. Ino could make out Team Four emerging from the north end of the arena and Yukio's team entering from the south.

Lucia's face was a mask. She didn't engage the Feudal Lords further. She *ignored* them, sitting straight in her seat and turning her head away to watch her Genin son walk onto the field.

"Hokage," Lord Daichi prompted. "I really think—"

"The match will continue," Naruto said. "We'll sort out your concern afterward."

"But-!" Lord Hiroki objected.

"Afterward," Naruto said firmly. "Who I choose to train in the Shinobi arts is *my* decision. You said so yourself. I do want to understand your objection, but afterward."

Chouji whispered in Ino's ear. "I suppose that's the right decision. I mean, it makes no difference now, does it? Whatever their objection, Itachi has already been taught. This match will just show what he can do."

Ino agreed, but she wasn't satisfied. Her head swiveled toward Lucia, seeking answers. She demanded explanation with her eyes, but Lucia's face was hard, her thoughts directed deeply inward. For several long moments, the woman didn't acknowledge her. She

didn't acknowledge anyone. When she did finally notice Ino's expression, she faintly shook her head, as if to say "not now."

Ino wanted to die from curiosity. From their conversation with Naruto before Lucia's arrival, it was clear that the Feudal Lords weren't fond of the idea of outsiders joining the ranks, but what was it about Itachi particularly that made that old man act like an army of ants had crawled up his leg? And how could Lucia be so calm? How did she even *know* Lord Daichi and Lord Hiroki? Presumably, she had met them when she was in the Land of Fire over a decade ago, but in what context? If it was just a chance meeting, why did they remember or care about her? Why did they care so *much* about her son being a Shinobi?

Furthermore, why hadn't Lucia said anything before today? Lucia knew the Feudal Lords were in the village; she had watched them arrive from Ino's garden. Now that Ino thought about it, Lucia had *asked* to watch the procession from the shop. Why? Was it because her garden was secluded enough that no one passing on the road who notice her? If that was true, Lucia must have *expected* that a confrontation would occur if she came face to face with the Feudal Lords.

Across the gap between her box and the Hokage's, Ino could see Naruto sitting with his arms crossed and eyes narrowed, watching the arena with a brooding expression. Shikamaru looked deceptively unconcerned, but if Ino knew him at all, he was thinking hard. And not about the match. Beside them, Lord Daichi and Lord Hiroki looked…unhappy.

And then there was the Grass and that bet that Lucia had made. She couldn't make the Grass out in the crowd, but they must be here somewhere. Did *they* know that there was a connection between Lucia and the Feudal Lords? It was enough to make her head spin.

She had the impression that she was sitting in a box of tinder. All it needed was one spark.

Sakura stood on the edge of the fighting grounds, just outside the outer ring between the bleachers and the arena. As a teacher, this was her place-the sidelines. She was closer to the action than anyone in the audience, but far enough away that she could only assist by shouting encouragement, which coaches generally refrained from doing.

She had left her team in the locker rooms beneath the arena to prepare. There wasn't much more she could do. It was up to them to perform now—win or lose.

She believed they were ready. Of course, they were nervous, but nervousness was expected.

She was, however, a little concerned about Itachi. He had been acting strangely the last few days—ever since his last training session with Sasuke.

She wasn't quite sure how to describe what was strange about his behavior. He came to practice the last two mornings ready to learn, and worked harder than ever to learn a lightning jutsu three days before the match, but he had seemed unusually tired, and troubled as well. He had confessed to her that his lesson with Sasuke had been brutal and that he had decided not to train with his uncle anymore. Sakura had attributed his drop in enthusiasm to Sasuke, and didn't comment.

But that didn't really explain why he was *so* tired. He must be training on his own in the afternoons now. Or perhaps it was just the pressure of the match. Concerned, she had told him to rest the final day—no training at all.

She might be over-worrying. In some ways, she was more nervous than her team. They only had to do their best—win or lose. But there were other matters riding on this match, socio-political matters that would affect the entire village.

She had heard from Ino that Lucia had placed a *bet* on Itachi, against the Grass ninja—and the figure was no paltry sum. It had led to some mutterings. Was the woman overconfident in her son's chances? Or was she being careless?

Careless didn't seem to suit what Sakura knew of Lucia's personality. But overconfidence was more worrying in some ways. If Itachi *lost* , Lucia would be forced to pay the sum…to her enemy. If she couldn't, or refused, the Grass would hold Konoha responsible.

Relations between the villages were bad enough already.

Of course, Itachi might win. Sakura believed that Team Four *could* defeat Yukio's team. They just had to be at the top of their game. They couldn't make any stupid mistakes.

She was so deep in thought that she didn't notice that someone was approaching her until he was already there.

She whirled, her heart beating so hard she could feel the pulse in her throat.

"S…Sasuke!"

It had only been three days since she had seen him, but the strain of those days was so heavy on her heart, it felt like years had gone by. Every moment she wasn't 110% occupied with something else—which she tried to be—she was thinking about Sasuke, furious with him and missing him by turns. She was like a broken record that kept playing the same two notes: Why couldn't he just be *good* to her? Why couldn't she just *forget* him? She didn't want to be in love with him. She didn't want to hate him. Why did he make her feel like it had to be one or the other? She couldn't stand it.

"I'm not trying to bother you," he said. His voice was quiet, controlled. She could detect no emotion in his tone. There were no clues at all as to what he was doing here.

She looked away from his face. She didn't want him to see her feelings.

"I just wanted to say something," he said when she didn't reply.

"What?" She forced out the word. In spite of a concerted effort to sound as detached as he did, it came out angry. She just couldn't do it; she had never been good at hiding her feelings. "What do you want to say?"

She forced herself to look up. Sasuke's face was just as she remembered it. It was exactly the way she saw it in her memory—soft skin and dark eyes and a sort of sweet, enduring sadness etched into every line. It was a face she loved, one she wanted to touch and to hold, and yet it filled her with fury.

"It's about the baby," he said softly. "I just wanted you to know that… I'll support it. What I said before was wrong. I wasn't thinking."

She stiffened. "I don't want your support."

He looked startled.

The emotion that flashed through Sakura both wet her eyes and sharpened her words into points. "I don't *need* you to support the *baby* , Sasuke. I want you to support *me* . I want you to love me. I want you to commit to *us* as a family. Don't you understand that?"

"I understand," he said. "Sakura, I'm not good for you."

That just made her angrier. "If that's the way you feel, then why should I want you in my life at all?"

"I don't know," he said. He looked her straight in the eye when he said it. "I guess you shouldn't."

She couldn't believe it. She just stared at him, stricken dumb by the matter-of-fact way he just agreed with her. He really didn't want to fight for their relationship at all. He didn't want to fight for her *at all.*

He didn't even want to fight for *himself* . She wanted to kick him, but she could see that it was useless. He wasn't just detached. Sadness hung on him like a shroud.

"I …don't hate you," she blurted out.

He closed his eyes, as if she had poured cool water over his head.

"I just… I want more from you," she said.

"I wish I could give you more. I don't want to hurt you, Sakura."

Then *don't* , she thought furiously.

Didn't he see that she *was* hurting? It hurt more to hear him say that to her so blithely, as if he had done *anything* to prevent it. What did he mean he *wished* ? Why was he here? Did he really want to offer his support, or was he looking for a way out of giving it? Had Naruto guilt-tripped him into this? Did he just want her to absolve him of the responsibility?

Taking a deep breath, she smoothed her features and tried to look pleasant. "Thank you, Sasuke," she said. "I don't need anything from you. You don't have to worry about me. I'm fine."

He looked puzzled.

"I have all the help I need," she repeated. "You've done enough."

You can keep on being useless , she thought privately. It was a bitter thought, which was why she didn't say it out loud. She had too many regrets already from the overuse of her tongue. She was just angry. She didn't want to be, but she was. She felt hurt and angry all the time, but making Sasuke feel bad wouldn't make her feel better. She could get through this without hurting him. Let him think she was fine.

I must really *love him,* she thought. The thought didn't comfort her. It wasn't a comfort that she wanted to throw rocks at his face and kiss

him at the same time.

It didn't matter. She had to face facts. She couldn't punch, scream, cajole, seduce, or love Sasuke into wanting to be in a family with her. She had tried it all to no success. If he wanted to be alone, he would be alone. The best she could do was to pretend she didn't care. Hopefully, someday, she really wouldn't.

"I'm glad you came to see the match," she told him. "Itachi has worked really hard. I know he wants you to see him."

For now , she thought. Maybe someday Itachi wouldn't care about Sasuke either. Another bitter thought.

"I came," Sasuke said. "But my mind hasn't changed. I don't think he should fight."

That just made Sakura feel tired. Why was Sasuke *so* pessimistic? Was it arrogance? Stubbornness? Residual hate from his past?

"Why not?" she asked him. "You've seen his progress yourself."

"It's not that," Sasuke said. "I just don't think he should be a Shinobi. It isn't a life for an outsider. He doesn't know what it means."

Sakura reflected on that. It was an unexpected response.

"Oh, Sasuke," she concluded sadly.

You like Itachi, don't you? She didn't say it out loud. Sasuke would just brush it off, or outright deny it, but she could tell that he did. He wouldn't worry about what kind of life the kid led if he cared as little as he pretended. She wondered if Sasuke realized that himself.

"Itachi isn't stupid," she said. "If he keeps growing at this rate, he'll be a Jounin before you know it. You can't stop him."

Sasuke's face didn't change. "I told him about the Uchiha," he said.

Sakura felt cold. "What…What about the Uchiha?"

Itachi hadn't said *anything* about any conversation about the Uchiha! She knew he had stopped training with Sasuke, and that was all. Was that why he seemed *so* tired? Was it emotional?

"I told him about the Sharingan," Sasuke said. His gaze was far away, looking backward in time perhaps, or at the ghosts of his family that Sakura couldn't see. "I told him what my brother did to me, and why. I wanted to be clear that the Sharingan is won through pain and death and intent to kill."

Sakura was aghast. "But that's not even true! You didn't get the Sharingan from killing anyone. If anything, it was in defending Naruto that—"

"You're wrong," he said, cutting her off. "It wasn't against Haku, or in defense of Naruto, that I first awoke the Sharingan. It first happened on *that* night."

There was little doubt which night Sasuke meant. It was always the same one.

"I forgot," he said, "like I forgot other things. I was willing to kill my own brother, and later on it was Haku I was willing to kill. It was lethal intent, the path of a warrior. That is why-"

"But not everyone's experience is the same," Sakura argued. "And you can't be certain that it is the will to kill that activates the Sharingan. You were *also* defending yourself and others. And even if what you think is true about the Sharingan, it's not *killing* that makes a *Shinobi* . I *know* you know that. "

"Pain and death," Sasuke said. "No matter what you call it or how you decorate it, that is what we are. We kill and we die. Does it really make that much of a difference why we do it?"

"Yes!" Sakura said. "Sasuke, please listen to yourself. I know your thoughts turn dark sometimes, but you don't believe what you are saying. I know you don't. Why we do what we do means everything! In defense of others, or for personal power, or out of revenge—it makes a huge difference. Sasuke, you *know* this! You know it better than anyone!"

Sasuke was quiet. He looked troubled.

She sensed a turning point in his hesitation. Was he actually *listening* to her?

"You shouldn't have told Itachi what you did," she said, pressing her advantage, "certainly not like *that* , and not so close to the match. All you probably did was shake his confidence. Or make him think less of you. Are you trying to scare him off the path to be a Shinobi?"

Sasuke remained quiet for several long moments. "Maybe," he said quietly.

Sakura was shocked into speechlessness. "But Itachi has worked *so* hard! It is his heritage. All he wants is for you to acknowledge him. He's like any kid. He just wants to belong."

"I know."

"Sasuke, I know you've come to care about him. If you just—"

He cut her off. "Maybe my thinking has been…darker…lately," Sasuke admitted. "You are right, too, about what it means to be Shinobi. I respect it. I *am* it. But the Uchiha line is cursed with hatred, and that boy…" He trailed off. "He *shouldn't* belong here. And I don't think he understands."

"Your family isn't cursed, Sasuke."

Sasuke didn't answer her. He wasn't listening anymore. Whatever window had opened had shut again.

A horn sounded above them, reverberating across the field.

"Look," she said. "The match is starting soon, so…"

Sasuke nodded. The look in his eyes made her knees weak. She felt… precious… in that gaze. It broke her heart. "I know," he said. "I will be watching, but elsewhere. I won't bother you again."

He turned and walked away from her.

She watched him go, biting her lip. *That isn't what I want,* she thought.

Itachi's heart was hammering in his chest. He knew he needed to calm down, but even taking slow, deep breaths wasn't helping to focus him.

Beside him, Haro's hands were shaking. Itachi watched out of the corner of his eye as Haro checked the pouch at his hip for the umpteenth time this morning. Itachi knew there were slugs in that pouch. They were grotesque, translucent little things called leech slugs. Haro had been working with them the past few days, getting them to respond to cues in his chakra.

Itachi refocused on breathing. They had rehearsed everything so many times, drilling formations until Itachi dreamed about them. It had gotten to the point that he was *stressed* while asleep. He didn't need to think about training anymore. He needed to relax.

"Wow, there are a lot of people out there," Amaya said. She stood as still as a statue, but there was tension in her expression. "I didn't think there would be this many. I don't see any empty seats."

"Is your dad here?" Haro asked her.

Amaya nodded. "He took time off a mission just to see me."

"So is my family," Haro said. " *All* of them, even my cousins and nephews and nieces. I feel like I'm gonna hurl."

"Do it here if you're going to do it," Itachi told him.

Haro looked at him like he was crazy.

"I'm serious," he said. "Lots of performers have stage fright. Better to throw up where the audience can't see you."

"That's true," Amaya echoed him. "You don't want to be seen sicking up. There are Feudal Lords in the audience."

That made Itachi want to be sick.

The three of them were crowded together under the archway that led to the underground locker rooms beneath the arena. They had their own space for preparing. Yukio and his team were on the south side, but didn't appear to have come up yet. At least, Itachi couldn't make them out.

Hearing Amaya and Haro talk about their families made Itachi sweep the crowd searching for his. As Amaya had indicated, the seats in the arena were filled to bursting with bodies, but he knew his mother and sister were sitting in one of the boxes, which made them easier to find. He thought he could make out his mother's dark hair and his sister's training clothes. There seemed to be some sort of lively discussion taking place in the box where the Hokage and the Feudal Lords were sitting.

The Hokage *and* the Feudal Lords.

How did Yukio's challenge escalate to this level?

The thought made him feel ill, so he stopped looking at the audience. Instead he closed his eyes and turned his thinking once again to his breathing.

Calm breaths. Think about your body. Relax your mind. Control your chakra.

The last few days were a blur. Practicing Chidori secretly with Rina merged hazily with more lighting training with Sakura and practice drills with his team. It didn't feel like enough, and yesterday he had been forbidden to train at all. Sakura had told them that a day of rest was crucial. Despite not feeling ready, he had obeyed. He really hadn't had the energy to do more.

Chidori was… draining. Doing just one completely zapped his chakra, and recovery was slow. Even after a night's sleep, he could feel the effects. He worried that Sakura may have noticed that he was sluggish the two days he trained with her after practicing with Rina the night before. Just getting the Chidori to take shape was extremely difficult, and holding onto it took all his concentration.

His Chidori had nowhere close to the power Sasuke's did, but it was bigger than Rina's walnut-sized one. Using it wiped him out for the rest of the day, so he only trained with Rina in the evenings right before bed, and he had only managed to complete a working Chidori twice. With it, he could split a rock in two.

But that was just for Rina. There's no reason to use Chidori in the match against Yukio, he told himself *. Without the Sharingan, it would leave me completely vulnerable to a counterattack, and I'd be completely useless afterward. The lightning jolt is better suited for what I need to do.*

Lightning jolt was the jutsu that Sakura had taught him. It was a rudimentary lightning trick. All it did was shock his opponent, throwing off their chakra control and—if he caught them by surprise—dismantling their jutsu. According to Sakura, it was especially effective against water clones, which were a prominent part of Yukio's arsenal, and it was possible to send it through the ground in a long range attack, which might really help them. Moreover, it wasn't nearly as brutal on Itachi's chakra reserves as the Chidori. He could use it several times without exhausting himself. Other than the

great fireball jutsu and regular taijutsu, it was his only attack move, but Amaya said that one or two power moves was common for most Genin.

I can do this, he told himself again. *My taijutsu is good. It isn't even recognizable to where it was in Academy. I can break out of genjutsu, and I have mastered clones, and fireballs, and now a lightning attack. I've got Haro and Amaya on my side. I've done everything I can do. I just have to relax* .

He tried to remind himself that he didn't have to win. He only had to do well. He only had to show everyone that he was Leaf Genin material, that he belonged here, and that he could be a credit to the Shinobi village. But he *wanted* to win. He wanted to beat Yukio. He wanted to show them—everyone in attendance—that he *was* a Shinobi.

The Jounin on the field finished their circuit and vanished from the arena. The seals were set.

A horn sounded.

"Oh, wow," Haro muttered. "That's for us, isn't it?"

Beside Itachi, Amaya took a deep breath, placing her hands on her knees and hanging her head down.

"You okay?" Haro asked her. His hands were no longer shaking. He hadn't touched the pouch at his side for several minutes.

Amaya nodded and straightened. "I'm ready. Itachi?"

"Yeah," he said. "Let's go."

They stepped forward together, leaving the shelter of the tunnel and walking side by side into the morning sunlight. Across the arena, Yukio, Michiko, and Jumei also emerged. All around them, the crowd erupted into cheers.

Itachi didn't look at the crowd. His eyes were drawn to his opponents.

Yukio was wearing all black and gray like the day before. A cowl-like shroud hung loosely around his neck that he could pull up over his face to hide everything but his eyes. If it were night he would be practically invisible. In the daylight, he could use it to hide his facial expressions, though it seemed he had chosen not to.

He was flanked on either side by Michiko and Jumei. As usual, Michiko stood out like a firecracker. She wore a bright orange leather vest and a midnight blue flap skirt over black shorts. Her arm guards were fire red, just like her long hair. Distracting striped tights with alternating horizontal bands of red, blue, and orange ran all the way up her legs to the mid-thigh. In contrast, Jumei's clothes were a blend of earth tones that made it almost difficult to see him, even in direct sunlight.

Michiko's bright blue eyes seemed to alternate between him and Amaya. Jumei studied Haro as closely as Haro studied him. Yukio's storm gray eyes were fixed on Itachi.

This is really about to happen. I'm going to fight Yukio.

Konohamaru appeared suddenly in the center of the arena floor—from where, Itachi could not say, as a puff of white smoke disguised the means of his entrance. He was the officiating Jounin for the match, and Itachi was pleased to see a familiar face, though he could expect no partiality as Konohamaru was familiar with all the Genin students and had known the others longer. Konohamaru didn't look at either team. Instead, he addressed the crowd, a huge grin plastered on his face.

"Welcome! Genin matches don't usually get this much attention, so this is quite exciting. Today, we have two of Konoha's newly formed Genin teams competing against each other. Ah, you'll have heard of them by now, I would guess, but introductions are important, so on

my left, we have Jumei, Michiko, and our fan favorite, Yukio, who has been most promising since the start of his Academy days.

The crowd erupted into acknowledging cheers.

"On my right, we have Amaya Satou, Captain Sachio Satou's daughter, as some of you will know, and Haro, whose clan, the Akamatsus, everyone in the medical community is familiar with, I'm sure, and Itachi, son of Itachi Uchiha and Sasuke Uchiha's nephew, newly come to our village."

Itachi wanted to blot out his own introduction. He could well-imagine Sasuke's frown, and he could feel the tension in the air from the other spectators. Konohamaru hadn't elaborated on where Itachi came from or given any reason for the match, but everybody knew. Eyes were glued to him from every corner. The question they all seemed to ask burrowed into his skin and permeated his mind: *Are you really one of us?*

Itachi eyes slid off Konohamaru and onto Yukio, who was still staring straight at Itachi. One side of Yukio's mouth pulled up in a sideways smirk.

Itachi felt his palms go sweaty.

Then he saw Sakura. She stood on the sidelines, her arms crossed over her chest and her feet spread evenly beneath her. She looked tough, and the look she tossed in his direction was even tougher—and encouraging.

Itachi tightened his hands into fists.

I've trained hard. I can do this.

He allowed himself to wonder where Sasuke was, if he was even watching.

No , he thought, checking himself. *I don't care.*

He had been trying not to think about Sasuke. His uncle believed that being an Uchiha meant killing family members for power. Itachi couldn't contemplate it without revulsion.

He was just trying to frighten me. He didn't mean it. It couldn't really have been like that… Could it?

He wasn't sure. It sounded like truth when Sasuke said he had taken Itachi's father's eyes. And hadn't his father killed his own clan? Had that been for power? Itachi suppressed his feelings. He didn't want to think about it. He wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

Haro jabbed him in the side. "Hey. Focus."

Konohamaru was speaking directly to them now.

"The rules are similar to regular matches," Konohamaru explained, "meaning that there really aren't any. You must consider this to be a no-retreat zone. The object is to force all members of the opposing team to surrender the fight. If you yield, you are out. Being killed or knocked unconscious qualifies as yielding. That being said, as the officiator, I can call the match at any time. If I call the match, it's over. You must drop all weapons and fall off. I name the winner. No rebuttals."

Great , Itachi thought. *There's nothing to prevent Yukio from trying to kill me in the first two minutes.*

"When we sound the bell, you may be begin," Konohamaru said. "Are you ready?"

Ready or not , Itachi thought grimly.

Across the arena, Yukio smiled at him, visibly shifting his weight to the balls of his feet and lowering the front of his body to a runner's stance. Itachi's breath caught in his throat.

He's really going to come straight at me, he thought. *He's going to try to lay me out in front of this crowd in the first minute, just like I knew he would.*

Itachi forced himself to exhale and focus. Beside him, Amaya crouched.

"Don't worry," she said. "We've got it."

Itachi nodded. They had practiced this scenario.

The bell sounded.

"Begin!" Konohamaru said.

As expected, Yukio shot forward. Amaya moved at the same time, darting behind Itachi and skirting to the left of Yukio's trajectory, shuriken coming into her hands from her sleeves. She engaged Michiko and Jumei, tossing shuriken in quick succession, disabling both of Yukio's team members from following him.

Itachi's eyes remained on Yukio, who didn't seem concerned that he had left his teammates behind. His hands were forming signs as his feet ate up the distance. Itachi recognized the signals from three days ago—the shadow cloak.

"Here we go," Haro whispered under his breath. "Remember: keep still."

Itachi nodded.

In order to mould his chakra with lightning, Itachi had to really take his time with it or risk shocking himself and having to start over. In their practices with Sakura, Itachi found that he had to stay pretty, doing nothing but mould lightning chakra to get it to work, which meant Haro or Amaya had to protect him or he was vulnerable. They had practiced with Amaya pretending to be Yukio, even going so far as having her use a transformation jutsu to look like Yukio while she

came at Itachi with knives and punches and jutsu—anything she could think up—while Haro protected him. Itachi had fried himself the first couple of times, losing control under duress. It took drilling before he had steadied his technique and was able to trust Haro to defend him long enough to get the lightning jolt to work.

But now, it was the real Yukio coming at him, and every second he mixed his chakra with lightning felt like an eternity.

Go slow, he told himself, breathing in and out. *Don't rush. Don't mess it up.*

His chakra was just starting to become current-like when the black of Yukio's clothes seemed to ooze around him like oil and tar. It obscured his entire body in shadow, like a blotch on the air that didn't stay still. The edges of it faded to a translucent gray and were indistinct, darting and shifting the way a candle flame did in the wind, so that the entire form was difficult for the eye to track.

Itachi didn't try to track it. He moulded chakra.

The blot that was Yukio closed the distance in three leaps. When he was within range of a kunai knife, Haro formed the signs for his earth style jutsu and drove both fists into the ground.

Rock and soil sprang up in front of Yukio like fountains. The shadow shifted and moved backward, and then switched directions, darting in from another angle.

Haro struck again. This time, the earth rolled like waves. Itachi wasn't sure, but it looked like Yukio might have tripped as he leaped to avoid the first wave and landed on the second.

The reprieve was brief.

"Kunai!" Itachi warned, not losing focus on his chakra.

A shower of knives came flying through the air toward him and Haro from beneath Yukio's shadow cloak. Haro grunted, slamming his fist into the ground a third time. Soil and rock surged upward, creating a wall in front of them. Itachi heard the thuds of the kunai knives sinking into the earth.

"You got it yet?" Haro asked him. After so many consecutive earth jutu, he was breathing hard.

"Got it," Itachi said. His chakra sizzled. He formed the signs for the lightning jolt. Shrouded by the wall as they were, Yukio wouldn't be able to see him. Yukio would expect fire, if anything, and then-

"Shit!" Haro shouted. "Michiko!"

Itachi turned. Somehow, Michiko had gotten around Amaya. She was on his and Haro's right, with almost a hundred feet between them, but Itachi could see her blue eyes fixed on him, her hands flickering through jutsu signs.

Don't look…

But he already had. The color in Michiko's tights and leather vest and arm guards suddenly seemed impossibly bright. The primary colors blended together with the secondary, creating a pattern that bemused him. Staring at it, he *felt* something-a shift in chakra, so subtle it was like a tickle in his brain.

The air around him became instantly hazy. He tried to find Michiko, but she had vanished. He turned to tell Haro that she wasn't there, but Haro was gone too. The rock wall was gone. Yukio was gone.

This is wrong.

He knew it, but the knowing was like being caught between sleep and wakefulness, in a place of dreaming that felt like being awake, but where nothing quite made sense. Itachi tried to talk, tried to say "this isn't right" but the words wouldn't come. He tried harder, tried to

scream it, but the words *wouldn't* come. He couldn't speak. Panic set in. He had no voice.

Stop, Itachi told himself. *It's your chakra, not your body. Focus on your* chakra *.*

His chakra was like a light pulsing deep inside him, similar to his heartbeat, but brighter. But there was disturbance near it, an echo that wasn't his chakra, overlapping it somehow.

Michiko.

He wanted to smile, not that anyone would see it in this place. This was Michiko's creation, but his emotions were still his own, and they soared. Sasuke's genjutsu had been *ten times worse* than this! He was amazed by how simple Michiko's manipulation looked in comparison. He focused his will on that echo. He shoved his chakra against it. Hard.

Michiko's genjutsu snapped like a twig.

Itachi's eyes flew open. He was back in the arena. A hundred meters to his right, Michiko let out a sound like "oof!", her knees buckling beneath her. She fell in a pile of striped tights and bright colors. From the ground, she stared at Itachi in disbelief, one hand pressed to her head as if she was pained or dizzy. Sweat streamed down her face.

The crowd was screaming. At first, Itachi thought they were complimenting his victory, but they weren't cheers.

I've lost time , he thought wildly. *Something else happened while I was out. What happened?*

It didn't take him long to understand. Haro was on the ground several yards from Itachi, kicking his feet in the dirt—apparently still caught in Genjutsu.

And that meant the earth wall was gone. It had fallen into dust.

Yukio wasn't behind it.

He was fighting Amaya.

Realization struck Itachi like a bell. Yukio had never meant to knock Itachi out at the first gasp. It was Amaya he cared about. It was Amaya, if anyone, that he feared. He must not have continued after Itachi following Haro's last earth jutsus. He had gone after Amaya as soon as his intent was shielded, leaving both Itachi and Haro to Michiko. And Jumei presumably, though Itachi had no idea where the other team's medical nin was.

Amaya was engaged with Yukio in a furious round of hand-to-hand taijutsu, her fists flying, her torso twisting and body ducking to avoid blows from the shifting mass of darkness that was Yukio's taijutsu-ninjutsu blend. Incredibly, Amaya was holding against it, but she wasn't getting any hits in herself. Every effort was defensive. Yukio would overwhelm her before long.

Itachi turned his head. Haro was on the ground, caught in Michiko's genjutsu.

Crap! What do I do?

Itachi hadn't expected to be in the position of choosing who to save. If anything, he had thought he would be the one needing saving.

He only had seconds to do something. Haro was closest. Ideally, he should try to club Michiko hard enough to knock her out of the game, which would also release Haro from the genjutsu without hurting him, but Michiko was too far away. There wasn't time.

He skidded toward Haro, dropping low in the last inch and whacking Haro on the back of the head.

"Ow!" Haro shouted, and curled up, holding his head and wincing in pain. "Oh geez, Itachi! She got me, huh?" Tears came to his eyes as he blinked at Itachi, but he rolled onto his heels and stood, one hand

still pressed to his head. "Did you have to hit me so hard? My head is-Oh, hell!"

Michiko was on her feet too and sprinting toward them, brandishing her short-hafted spear from the holster on her back.

At the same moment, a white flash exploded on Itachi's left.

Itachi recognized it as Amaya's bright star jutsu.

"She used it at close range!" Haro screeched.

Itachi risked a glance. Amaya appeared to have injured herself as well as Yukio. They were both on the ground, Amaya's wire-tied shuriken scattered all about them both like broken toys. Both she and Yukio were moving, but slowly. Yukio's shadow cloak had vanished. He rolled onto his knees, blinking his eyes. He was stunned, but he was getting up.

Itachi had no more than a second to spare for either of them.

Michiko came at him and Haro like a ball of furious energy. Itachi armed himself, kunai knives spinning into his hands. Remembering Michiko's penchant for jumping, he tossed two, one low and the next a little higher, but not high or fast enough. Michiko evaded both. Her jump was humanly impossible. She vaulted into the air with a burst like a jet, effortlessly flying a hundred feet above their heads.

"She's using chakra to power off the ground," Haro told him. "We need—"

Motion on the left barely caught Itachi's eye. It was Jumei. He was racing toward Yukio . Amaya was still face down.

Haro saw it too.

"I've got Michiko!" Itachi gasped. "Help Amaya!"

"Are you su—?"

"Go! I've got it!"

Haro didn't argue further. He bolted. He had less ground to cover than Jumei, but not by much. They would probably get to their injured teammates at close to the same time.

Itachi focused. Michiko was high above him, and still rising on the propulsion of her leap. She was completely out of his reach, but perfectly able to target *him* . Her hand swung up above her shoulder, and in a split moment, her short spear came hurtling down, straight at Itachi's head.

He stood his ground. *I can avoid that,* he thought grimly, *but I know she'll follow right after it.*

That was the trick beneath the trick. He just had to counter it.

As he watched, Michiko's ascension reversed. She floated for an instant, like a kite, and then came falling fast. *She's going to try and crush me with the same power she used to propel herself upward* , he thought. If he had it right, it would be sort of similar to Sakura's earth punching technique. Her strategy was to force him to focus on the spear and dodge it, leaving himself open for the second attack, which would doubtlessly knock him out. It was a good strategy, unless he didn't *try* to dodge, and didn't let her land.

Easy enough.

The hand signs for the great fireball jutsu came to him effortlessly, almost forming themselves they were so embedded in his memory. Sasuke had drilled it into him so many different ways he could have roasted Michiko while flying through the air upside down. He breathed deep, mixing chakra and fire element in his lungs.

"Katon! Great Fireball Jutsu!"

It was his first demonstration of a jutsu. The roar of the crowd drummed in his ears as flame erupted from his lungs. The spear

disintegrated almost upon impact. He felt the charred ashes of the remains dust his face, sticking to his cheeks and eyelashes, but it was Michiko upon whom his gaze was fixed.

Her eyes widened at the sight of the fire and the heat of the flame into which she was dropping. Her hands frantically formed signs for what looked like a substitution. He didn't think she was going to make it.

Something slammed into Itachi from the side. He rolled, gasping, the heat from the katon burning his lungs as his jutsu went out.

Yukio crouched on the ground just paces away from him.

But no. Itachi could see that Yukio was still with Jumei, facing off against Haro and Amaya, who was back on her feet.

One of them had to be a water clone.

Michiko landed with a thud, her clothes charred in places, her long red hair wild around her face.

Itachi immediately began to create a current with his chakra. This time he had no Haro to protect him, and an additional opponent besides, but since Yukio had seen the great fireball jutsu, it was his best shot. He got slowly to his feet, staring both of his opponents down, trying to buy time.

He had to acknowledge Michiko's ferocity. She was small, but she was tough. Still, it looked like one of her legs was giving her some trouble. She kept her weight off her left foot, and hobbled when she moved. She must not have landed on it quite right. Not that it mattered. With Yukio right there, they had the advantage over him.

Time for his element trick.

His hand formed the signs as he converted his chakra, feeding it lightning instead of fire, using the pattern he had practiced over and

over with Sakura until he couldn't see straight.

Yukio's lips pressed in a line as he saw Itachi start to form a new jutsu. "Fireball again?" he mocked. "Don't think I can't dodge it!"

Yukio charged.

Itachi released the lightning jolt through the ground.

There was an audible buzzing sound as Yukio collided with the jutsu, like a bee flying into a jar. The electric shock burst from the ground and made the air on the back of Itachi's neck stand up. Michiko felt it too. She stumbled and collapsed on her bad leg, whimpering with pain.

Yukio's form burst apart. Water sprayed everywhere.

It was the clone.

On his left, a volley of bright explosions, one after another, grabbed his attention.

Amaya was on her feet. She was hurling her special shuriken that exploded upon impact, forcing Yukio and Jumei to retreat backward. The jutsu was a variation of her bright star jutsu, which detonated multiple shurikens at mid-range. For long range, Sakura had taught Amaya to concentrate all her chakra into one star at a time instead of the wire-connected volley, and hurl them in quick succession like discs. The result was a series of head-numbing, eye-blinding explosions.

Amaya's face was set, her mouth a thin line as each shuriken shot through the air burst in a white flash just in front of Yukio and Jumei. Jumei and Yukio hovered on the edge of her range, shielding their eyes from the light of the blasts. They didn't counterattack. They seemed to have found the limit of her range, retreating toward the south wall as she came forward, but doing nothing else. Yukio said something to Jumei, who nodded.

Itachi quickly understood. They were waiting. It was plain to see why. Something appeared to be wrong with Amaya. Her throws started to miss. Then they became downright sloppy, shuriken careening in wild directions, getting increasingly worse until one dropped numbly from her fingers to fall uselessly to the ground at her feet.

She doubled over, retching once, and dropped to her knees, her head bobbing on her shoulders like a rock connected to the rest of her body by rubber.

Jumei has done something to her, Itachi thought. *Poison?*

Yukio started laughing.

Haro let out an angry yell and punched the earth. The tremor rocketed beneath the ground to explode under Yukio and Jumei's feet. Yukio dodged it, but Jumei collapsed like a bowling pin. As Yukio helped his teammate to his feet, Haro dashed to Amaya's side. Itachi watched as he fished a slug out of the pouch and put it on Amaya's neck. She was still on her knees, her muscles visibly shaking.

Itachi formed hand signs for a second lightning jolt.

I'll bet I can hit Jumei from here , he thought. *Maybe Yukio too.*

"Hey! Don't forget about *me* !"

Itachi whirled at the sound of Michiko's voice. He had thought she was down!

Her leg was bad, but somehow she had managed to hobble forward until she stood right next to him, all color and laughter. Too close. He found himself staring, mesmerized by blue eyes that were impossibly blue, red hair that was impossibly red, the blue, orange, and red stripes on her tights climbing band over colorful band into heaven until a rainbow wall of color was all he could see.

"You're kinda fun," Michiko giggled, her voice coming to his ears seemingly from far away. He couldn't see the girl anymore—just colors. "Much better than I thought. Why don't you take a break?"

This isn't right.

He knew it was genjutsu. He had snapped it before… .

It was no use. Michiko's one-on-one genjutsu delivered at close range was much more potent than her attack at the beginning of the match. Itachi was sinking in a sea of color and stripes. He struggled against it, gathering his chakra to punch a hole in the madness that surrounded him, but it was like trying to scramble out of a chute built by a circus clown. All he could see was bands of color alternating end over end until he felt dizzy and sick and just wanted it to stop.

Why don't you take a break?

It sounded so tempting. But if he rested, it would be because all had turned black.

Chakra , he thought. *Got to disrupt…*

Pain lanced through him.

He gasped, blinking at the arena that came sharply into focus around him. He was on his knees, his head throbbing.

"One for one," Haro said, shaking out his hand.

Amaya was beside Haro, her back to them both, tossing exploding shuriken one after the other at Yukio and Jumei to keep them at bay.

Haro offered Itachi a hand, which Itachi took. Once on his feet, he immediately began converting his chakra into lightning, as they had drilled he must do whenever he had a chance to stand still.

A few feet away from him, Michiko was on her knees, her head lolling the way Amaya's had been.

"I put the slug on her," Haro explained. "It absorbed Jumei's poison from Amaya. Now it will excrete it into Michiko's skin."

"Gross," Itachi said.

But even as he said it, Michiko let out a groan and pitched forward. She lay prostrate on the grass, her eyes closed.

"Passed out," Haro said. "That means she yields."

Exclamations reverberated around them from the audience.

From near the south wall of the arena, Yukio looked pissed.

"I think Yukio's only been half serious up until now," Haro said. "I don't think he believed we would last this long."

"He thought he could toy with us," Amaya said. "We taught him differently."

Itachi didn't say anything for a moment. The noise of the crowd was louder than it had been at the start. He supposed they had already proved that their team wasn't fodder, but he wasn't satisfied with that. He wanted to win this thing.

"Let's beat him," he said.

Amaya nodded. "We've got the advantage in team members now. Let's use it."

"Long range?" Haro asked.

"I'm out of shuriken," Amaya replied, patting an empty pouch at her hip. "But I have enough wire-laced kunai knives for one mid-range attack, old style. If I can hit Yukio with it, he'll be blinded long enough for us to take him down."

"Yukio's doing a jutsu," Haro warned, cutting her off. "Better get ready."

It was true. Yukio was completing a sequence of hand signs.

"Water clones," Amaya said grimly.

She was right. Not one, but *two* clones of Yukio appeared on either side of him.

"I didn't know he could do two simultaneously," Haro said. "Now *they've* got the advantage."

"No problem. I'll zap them," Itachi said. He formed the hand signs for the lightning jolt and sent a current at each of Yukio's clones.

The chakra-laced lightning bolt lanced through the ground. Itachi gasped when both of Yukio's clones and Yukio himself evaded it.

"Missed!" Haro said. "He's adapted."

"I'll prep another," Itachi said, but he didn't think he'd get it ready in time.

Amaya darted forward. "Never mind. I'll settle this."

She pulled her chakra-threaded kunai knives from her belt. Itachi had seen her do the mid-range bright star jutsu enough to know he didn't want to look at it directly. He also knew it would swallow Yukio and both his clones at once. He turned his head aside as the knives were thrown.

The resulting explosion rocked the arena floor. White light penetrated his eyelids, almost burning his tears away even with his eyes closed. When he opened his eyes, he saw spots. Yukio's water clones were gone.

But Yukio himself came through the light and straight at Amaya. He was covered by the shadow cloak.

"The clones were a decoy!" Haro shouted.

Amaya had been partially blinded by her own blast, but Yukio's cloak seemed to have shielded him from the same treatment. He penetrated her guard two seconds after she released her jutsu. One hand slammed into her throat.

Amaya choked, falling on her knees at Yukio's feet. Without hesitation or mercy, Yukio pivoted on one foot, twisting at his torso and throwing his weight sideways and down. He gripped his fist in one hand and dropped the point of his elbow onto the back of Amaya's neck. She collapsed, face down in the dirt and as limp as a doll.

Itachi stared, horrified.

"Amaya!" Haro screamed. He darted forward, kunai knives launching from his hands.

"Wait, Haro!" Itachi shouted after him.

But Haro was already out of Itachi's reach, kunai knives flying from his hands.

We shouldn't separate , Itachi thought, frantically continuing to feed lightning into his chakra. He had to put Yukio out, or at least distract him long enough to rescue Haro and put some distance between them.

Focus , he thought. *Breathe deep* . His chakra was just starting to sizzle.

Yukio avoided Haro's kunai, springing into the air so that they flew beneath his feet. His leap wasn't as high as Michiko's chakra-infused one, but it was powerful and looked effortless, like a dancer's, all straight lines and efficient use of muscle. There was nothing Itachi could do except watch as Yukio rotated, releasing a combination spin kick that somehow caught Haro twice across the face in the same move. Blood spouted from Haro's nose. He stumbled backward.

There! His chakra was ready.

Itachi formed signs for the lightning jolt, ready to fry Yukio. At the same moment, Jumei cut across the field. The tips of his fingers glowed white. Haro turned, but not swiftly enough. As Haro pivoted, Jumei's fingers caught him across the back of the knee. Haro's skin split open, blood pouring from the wound. Haro screamed in pain. He dropped on his good knee as Jumei rounded on him for a second attack.

Itachi swore. It didn't seem that Haro could rise. His face was swelling from Yukio's kick and he was clutching his leg. Itachi didn't stop to consider. He redirected the course of the lightning jolt, frying Jumei instead of Yukio.

Jumei seized like a kite in a storm. Haro grabbed the kid's ankle, yanking his leg out from under him and knocking his head against the ground.

Yukio's fist caught Itachi in the side of the head.

Itachi stumbled to the side, his head ringing from the blow.

"I have to admit," Yukio said. He wasn't far from Itachi, one hand planted on the ground. "I didn't expect it to come down to you and me. How did you learn *two* elements?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you're an arrogant asshole?" Itachi returned, pressing a hand to the side of his face to stop the pounding. "Why shouldn't I learn two elements? I trained!"

Yukio was panting hard. "You think you're a Shinobi?" he said. "You're wrong."

Itachi was furious, but could also feel Yukio's anger. It was real, hostile contempt. He didn't know how to react to it. He wasn't accustomed to so much anger being directed at his person. It fueled his fury further. He didn't deserve this. On top of that, all he could

think about was Amaya and Haro, one lying inert like a broken piece of furniture and the other bleeding and unable to stand. It was Yukio's fault—all of it.

"I never did *anything* to you," Itachi said. "Answer me this: Why did you want to fight me?"

"Because I'm Shinobi," Yukio answered. "Because you didn't do *anything* ."

Itachi was puzzled.

"Don't you get it?" Yukio spat. "You waltzed into Konoha, from some rich, idle society, from a different part of the *planet* , thinking this Shinobi stuff is *so* cool. You think you belong here? You aren't one of us!"

"My father was an Uchiha."

Yukio seethed with rising anger. "So what? Everyone knows the Uchiha. And everyone knows they are almost gone. I am the first of my name with any hope of distinguishing the clan. Do you know what that *means* to me? Can you possibly understand?"

Itachi didn't say anything.

"Within a *day* that you arrived here," Yukio shouted, "within an *hour* , everyone knew exactly who *you* were! Don't you get it? I had to *earn* that! The Genin, the Chuunin, even the Jounin- they all know my name. I had to *build* that. And they hold me back! But *you* . They let *you* become a Genin? Because you're the son of Itachi Uchiha? What a joke!"

Itachi barely raised his arms in time to block Yukio's punch from hitting his face. The force of Yukio's fist drove him backward. The impact jarred his bones. His arm throbbed so badly, he wanted to vomit.

Yukio gave him no time to recover. It was all Itachi could do to catch his breath before Yukio's hands and feet were flying at his face. He didn't think. There was no time. He blocked short jabs and swift kicks with mindless reaction, his muscles remembering sparring matches with Sasuke more quickly than his head could think through the forms.

It didn't take him long to realize the truth. Yukio was quick—quicker than he was. The kid moved like a snake. He was like some kind of black adder.

Itachi felt like an idiot. Sasuke's training hadn't been too harsh. If anything, it hadn't been fierce enough.

Sasuke's words rose hazily to his mind.

Yukio is a true Shinobi. He will give you no quarter. You can't beat him.

"Admit it!" Yukio shouted, slamming a fist into Itachi's every block. "You don't deserve to be here! Yield!" The onslaught was relentless, each blow landing with a resounding thud, punctuated with the same command, over and over and over until all the bones throughout Itachi's whole body were rattling. "You don't belong here! Yield!"

Forfeit the match. Sasuke's voice.

You're an outsider.

"Like hell!" Itachi shouted.

He caught Yukio's next punch with his hand, absorbing the impact with his palm, and moved immediately aside, twisting out beneath his own arm to throw off Yukio's trajectory, the way Sasuke had done repeatedly to him. Yukio's eyes widened as he lost his balance, continuing to fall forward on his own inertia. Itachi threw the full force of his body into a backward rotation, aiming a wheel kick at the back of Yukio's head as the other boy passed him, but somehow Yukio

sensed it. Itachi's foot passed harmlessly over Yukio's head, and even as Yukio fell, his hands snaked out to grab Itachi by the ankle and shin. Yukio heaved, throwing Itachi over his shoulder using Itachi's own momentum.

Itachi pitched through the air as Yukio tumbled forward. Both of them landed in the dust.

Yukio threw technique aside. He leapt on Itachi like it was a school yard brawl, pinning his arms with his knees so he could hit his face without restraint.

Blows rained down on Itachi from Yukio's fists, but Itachi had been in this predicament before. With a surge, he threw his full body weight to the side. Yukio tumbled off.

Itachi rolled over on his hands and knees, bleeding from somewhere above his eyebrow.

He found himself staring at his wrist—at the weight wrapped around it.

Shock struck him deep in the gut. He was wearing the *weights* ? He had forgotten about them. He had been wearing them day and night, to the point where they had become a part of him.

He ripped them off, dropping them to the dirt, and the ones around his ankles too.

They hit the ground with a heavy thud.

Yukio got to his feet, staring at the weights with an intense expression.

"Shinobi training," Itachi answered the unspoken question.

Yukio smirked and came at him again, kunai knives in hand. Itachi parried, his own kunai gripped in either fist, point facing downward so that he could block against his forearm and use the force in his

arm's downward rotation to drive the point toward his opponent. He couldn't hit Yukio, but he could keep up now. The blades clanged against each other, the scrape of metal on metal sharp in Itachi's ears. Yukio withdrew and reengaged. Itachi caught each blow.

Yukio attacked with incredible precision. Itachi's speed was keeping him alive, but he was only holding.

Suddenly, Yukio disengaged. He flipped backward, sheathing both kunai in his sleeves. Sweat beaded on his brow. He stared at Itachi with eyes that pierced like daggers.

"All right. You learned taijutsu," Yukio said. "It just means I should have done this from the start."

Yukio's hands flickered through the signs for the shadow cloak.

Itachi cursed.

The gray haze of shifting darkness sprang on him.

Itachi could no longer see Yukio's fists or feet. His counterattacks were guesses, so it didn't matter how fast he was. He blocked one hit only to miss another. Yukio's knuckles slammed against his jaw. He stumbled.

I'm going to lose, he thought.

"Yield!" Yukio shouted again, this time with confidence instead of anger.

Itachi fell backward, barely avoiding a second blow from Yukio. He needed to buy time. Somehow… His hands formed signs for the great fireball jutsu.

"Katon-!"

Itachi didn't see what struck him, but he felt the blow hit his ribs. It might have been Yukio's boot, slamming against his midriff. The air

seeped out of him like helium let loose from a balloon. He lost the jutsu, coughing for air. His breast bone throbbed. The inside of his lungs burned. He doubled over from the pain.

"I can block everything you've got! You can't win! Yield!"

Itachi stumbled away from Yukio, fighting to breathe. He was barely able to wheeze. The air that fed into his lungs sounded as if it had to squeak through.

He'll break me to pieces if I don't yield.

The darkness flickered again, shifting toward him.

Desperate, Itachi formed signs for a clone. An empty replica of himself materialized in front of him, blocking Yukio's path, but it only gave Itachi inches of space to retreat. Yukio smashed through it when it had barely formed. The clone exploded into air.

"Yield!" Yukio screamed. "You aren't a Shinobi! You *will* yield!"

"Why are you so convinced that I can't be a Shinobi?" Itachi shouted back. "Is it my mother? Her secrets?"

"I don't give a fuck about your mother!"

Itachi had no capacity to measure or analyze Yukio's fury. Instead, he tried to trace the sound of Yukio's voice, searching the surface of the shadow cloak for the exact source of the sound as he fell back. But it was all just a blur of gray. His arms caught blows from Yukio's fists almost by accident, his muscle memory remembering the forms of strike and counterstrike from the drills Sasuke had physically beat into him. If he could keep Yukio talking long enough to isolate Yukio's face…

"Why?" he gasped. "I have trained the same as you."

"Bullshit! I've trained since I could walk. You're a civilian! It doesn't matter how much you train! I don't care what jutsu you learn. It's how

you see things! You are a protected person. You don't do what we do. You don't know what it means to sacrifice. You have no understanding of what it means to be Shinobi! Yield!"

A kunai knife slashed out at Itachi from the darkness. He barely managed to pull back so that the edge of it caught only his clothes, ripping the seam of his sleeve from shoulder to chest.

The way he saw things? He wondered in delirium what Yukio meant, frantically trying to recall his feelings when he walked into the Academy that first day, what he had said to Iruka and to the Hokage to join the Academy class, and why he had trained so hard. It certainly wasn't because he thought Shinobi were cool. And it wasn't just his father. That was part of it, but he had never met his father. He knew next to nothing about the man. It wasn't just that.

The answer came to him in the form of a face.

Gehard.

It seemed so long ago now, but he remembered. The man he had *called* father, who had never felt like family, who had always seemed distant and disgusted with him, who had seemed to harbor a secret hatred of Itachi… That man had drunk himself into a rage, had choked his mother, had backhanded his sister… He remembered his mother's white face and ice cold determination. And Rina's silence.

And Itachi himself had been helpless, face to the floor, afraid to move.

Gehard would never be able to do that to me now. He would never be able to hurt either of them like that again, not if I was there to protect them, to protect all of us. That is why…

But Yukio didn't seem to see it that way. Itachi's reasons weren't enough for him.

Itachi felt the severity of it, the expectation of it, and not just from Yukio, but from everyone watching. What did *Shinobi* think it meant…to be a Shinobi?

Maybe Sasuke had been right. This life wasn't about his feelings. It wasn't about his family. It wasn't about how Sasuke treated him, or whether he had Uchiha blood or not, or how anyone felt about his mother. None of that mattered. *He* didn't matter. And if he didn't figure it out, if he didn't take this seriously, he *should* yield.

Do you have killing intent, nephew? Do you?

Itachi felt suddenly cold. Was that what he was missing?

You're a protected person.

What did Yukio mean?

Am I weak?

Yukio grabbed him by the throat, shoving him against the arena wall. Itachi didn't realize he had been pushed back so far. He struggled, fighting to breathe, fighting to *fight* .

"This is the last time I will give you the option! Yield!"

This is it.

Itachi's gaze flickered to Amaya, lying face down and unconscious in the dirt, and then to Haro, who was grasping his leg with fingers covered in blood, watching Itachi with wide-eyes. He glanced at the stands, where his mother and sister were watching. He couldn't make out their expressions, but they were precious to him.

No.

He couldn't give up. He wouldn't give up. He wasn't going to forfeit. Yukio was wrong. He *did* belong here, in this village, his father's

village, as a Shinobi. He would prove it. He had to defeat Yukio, *whatever* it took. Even if he had to kill him to do it.

The decision was total.

And abruptly, the world looked… different.

The darkness around Yukio dissipated, the shadow cloak dissolving like mist evaporating in sunlight.

"No way," Yukio gasped. His grip on Itachi's throat lightened. Itachi wrenched free, pulling out of Yukio's grip. Yukio took a step back in shock, staring straight into Itachi's eyes.

And Itachi knew.

The thunder from the crowd drowned out all other sound. Everyone was on their feet. People were pressing against the edge of the audience boxes. They were standing on the benches.

The Sharingan.

Itachi didn't feel anything. He didn't react at all.

He only wondered what his eyes looked like. He wondered if his mother and sister could see them. He wondered if Sasuke could see it. He glanced at the sidelines, where Sakura was standing. She had both hands pressed to her mouth, her eyes round and…frightened?

Itachi didn't feel frightened. He didn't even feel surprised. It felt… normal…to him. It felt right. It was as if everything had suddenly been straightened right-side up from a place where it had been tilted before.

I am *an Uchiha. Definitively.*

Yukio did not ask him to yield again. He didn't say anything. His expression was concentrated…and desperate. His hands flickered.

Itachi pushed himself off from the wall.

I see you .

He saw the signs for the shadow cloak almost before Yukio had finished forming them. He watched, nonplussed, as the darkness spread to cover Yukio's form. He could see how it was done, the flow of the chakra, and its shape. He saw exactly how much chakra it took for Yukio to maintain it.

That's why he doesn't use it constantly , he thought. *It's a drain.*

He wanted to laugh. With these eyes, Yukio's shadow cloak was little more than a thin veil. He could still see Yukio beneath it. He could see right *through* it.

Yukio moved, the shadow cloak shifting around him.

Itachi punched Yukio straight in the face.

The crowd roared. Yukio staggered backward, the shadow cloak vanishing.

They stared at each other.

"I'm not going to let you win!" Yukio screamed at him. "Not even with those eyes! Not EVER! I've trained my whole life for this! Just try and beat me! There's no way in hell!"

Yukio came at him, and Itachi realized that he had been holding himself in check before. His taijutsu was more furious, more powerful, but Itachi could adapt. He could see the direction Yukio's energy would take. He understood it, and he was able to counter, twisting as Yukio twisted, learning from him even as he fought him. Panic replaced ferocity in Yukio's face. He disengaged, turned, and ran. Itachi gave chase.

Blood pounded in his head, beating in his ears as he pursued Yukio. The thunder or the crowd was all around him, but he couldn't make

out any voices. All his attention was on Yukio—Yukio who was *running* from him, Yukio who thought he could escape.

I am *Shinobi!*

Two water clones of Yukio appeared in Itachi's path, turning about face to block his progress. He could tell they were clones, being composed of less chakra than the real Yukio, who fled behind them. Itachi skidded to a stop. He still had to pause to summon lightning to his chakra, powering it until it crackled. He would zap them all.

The clones converged on him together before he could finish. They exploded when they touched him.

Itachi was flung back by the force of water hitting him in the face like a storm. He dropped to his knees.

He didn't know Yukio could detonate his clones.

Yukio was still running, but he was zagging now, turning as if he had some strategy in mind.

He thinks he knows all my moves, Itachi thought. *He's caught his breath and now he thinks he can counter them, even with these eyes. Let's see him counter this!*

Itachi gathered lightning chakra again, this time centering it in his palm—just as Rina had taught him. Pulses shot down his arm, through his shoulder, around his elbow, and straight out from his wrist. It manifested in his hand, cracking and whizzing like a firecracker. Trying to hold onto that energy was like trying to grasp a panicked cricket the size of a small dog.

Yukio skidded to a halt, still several yards shy of him, staring at the blazing light in Itachi's hand with alarm.

Itachi could barely suppress elation. The horror on Yukio's face, after so many looks of contempt and condescension, spurned him to

action. He surged forward, sprinting fast, his feet eating up the ground in a straight line. He thought he heard Sakura's voice in the din, but he couldn't make out her words through the high pitched whine in his ears.

The blazing light of Chidori illuminated the other boy's face to the point of obscuring everything else. Itachi could see everything written there—panic, horror, shame, fear.

Itachi could see it all. He could see everything so clearly, almost before it happened. There was no way he would miss. Yukio couldn't grab at him, and he couldn't outrun him either, not forever. If he dodged or fled, Itachi could catch him. He would have to yield or be killed. He was going to win.

" *YOU* yield!" Itachi shouted, flinging his opponent's words back in his face.

Itachi could see the hesitation…the consideration…in Yukio's eyes.

I've beaten him, he thought with amazement. *I've got him cornered! He doesn't know how to counter this!*

He *saw* it. Victory.

Then something went wildly wrong.

Chidori contorted. It was like a live serpent in his hand. He couldn't hold onto it. He couldn't control it. He saw, watching with minute detail, as the lightning imploded in his hand. The shock surged up his arm, through his shoulder, and across his entire body. Pain like he had never known exploded in his head. He convulsed, knowing he was going to crash and that he could do nothing to stop it.

I screwed it up, he thought wildly.

Yukio's eyes were as round as saucers. Itachi saw every emotion pass before his Sharingan like lazy butterflies. He watched as

Yukio's expression rebounded from shame and fear to astonishment and then to sudden, fierce, and grim determination. Itachi was still pitching forward, his body wrecked, when Yukio lunged at him. The other boy grabbed his wrist, forcing him back up.

That expression…

I won't lose!

His thought? Or Yukio's?

Yukio's kunai knife rotated in his hand; the blade that was flush up against his forearm slashing down toward Itachi's face. To Itachi's Sharingan eye, it was slow motion, like watching raindrops converge and drip off the end of a leaf, but seeing everything availed him in no way at all. His body felt like a live wire, every nerve ending fried from electric shock, his chakra stores in tatters. He couldn't move. He couldn't do anything.

And he saw in Yukio's face that the other boy knew it.

The kunai knife struck him with a fierce, slashing jab.

The crowd roared.

Itachi screamed.

Red covered everything. It blossomed like a rose and then ran like hot ink.

He fell to his knees. He could barely move. On shaking limbs, moving by instinct, he covered his left eye with one hand, trying to stop the blood that was streaming down his face. He felt more than blood. He actually felt his eye, a round shape half in his palm and not fully in his head where it was supposed to be. He couldn't see out of it. Not at all. He panicked. Only through his right eye could he see anything. He blinked through blood and tears. But all he saw was more blood. His blood. On the ground. On Yukio's boots.

There was shouting and movement and the pounding of feet reverberating around him. He thought he saw Konohamaru.

My eye…

Yukio's boots moved. Blood was ground into the dirt by his cleats.

From the sidelines, he saw Sakura leap into the arena.

It's over. Konohamaru's called it. I've lost the match.

It barely registered. He'd lost an *eye* … He couldn't think about anything else. He couldn't even register Yukio bearing down on him, though he could sense the wildness of his energy and he could see the glint of steal with his good eye. He could see Sakura's boots running toward both of them too. She was shouting something. She was too far away to make a difference.

Yukio is going to kill me.

In a flash of movement, another Jounin appeared between them—a man dressed all in green with black hair and thick, dark eyebrows. With blurring speed and strength, he physically picked up and hauled Yukio away from Itachi. Yukio was thrashing and screaming. Screaming at Itachi. Itachi thought he might be screaming back, but he didn't know what he was saying. He felt light-headed and sick. He couldn't understand anything.

The blood covering his hand was slippery.

"Itachi, stop!"

He didn't know what he was doing, but he recognized Sakura's voice. He stopped.

"Get him on the gurney! Quickly! There isn't a second to waste. Haro, take this syringe. Fill it. Itachi, stay calm."

He could barely make out Sakura's face through blood and tears as he was lifted by someone—he wasn't sure who; he couldn't see them—and placed on what he assumed must be a gurney. His good eye locked desperately onto Sakura's face. Sakura was a healer. A surgeon. Behind her he could see Haro, healed enough to be on his feet it seemed, though his face was ashen gray. There were other medics on the field. Was that Michiko being carried from the arena? The commotion was meaningless to him.

"My eye," he choked to Sakura.

"Stay calm," Sakura said. "We're taking you to the hospital."

He felt woozy, but the panic was worse than the blood loss. "Am I going to lose it?"

"Let me see."

He was afraid to move his hand, but he also knew she had to see. He peeled his fingers back slowly, just enough to show Sakura.

Sakura took one long look and then turned her head from his face. "Haro," she said sharply. "We need to give Itachi the sedative. Right now. Yes." She looked back at him. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth. Worry scrunched the skin between her eyes. "Itachi," she said. "Itachi, can you hear me? I'm going to have to put you under so I can operate. Count backward from ten, okay?"

His head was really starting to throb and his eye felt… wrong. It felt… mangled. He knew it was bad. He tried to count, but couldn't. He felt a needle prick the inside of his arm. He tried to count again, trying to remember to breathe. Ten. Nine.

He got to six before he suddenly felt like he couldn't breathe anymore, like he was losing feeling throughout his body, like life was seeping out from him. He couldn't keep his hand in place over his eye.

TBC

I love love love LOVE any review. I am happy for any comment, so please let me know you are reading!

There are four scenes in this chapter, with the last being BY FAR the longest. I'd appreciate comments on all the scenes, though I expect the last one to get the most attention for obvious reasons. In case you forgot and don't want to scroll…

Rina explains why she was failing on purpose and teaches Itachi Chidori

Lucia and the Feudal Lords

Sasuke talks to Sakura

The match (sub-interests: abilities, strategy and choices of characters, Yukio's personality and motivation, the exchange between Yukio and Itachi, end result of match, etc.)

People I know are awesome because they reviewed the last chapter:

Nia (LOVELY review! I just read it…it's awesome T_T), Arishimo, Higorashumi, that girl, hotoffthefryer, kimi-vivian, GoldenRat, Quiet Samuel, geckhawaii, The Elven-Spear, Jemma-Jo, ToxiNeena, KatMaxKu, Kikyostar1, Silent-Gamine, Yuu, A.E. Stover, Bisepadi, , BukkakenoJutsu, BloodyGoddess, Nara Merald, ScreenSurfer, Phalanxx, Blue Aidelle, Goldberry, meantimegirl, anundecidedteen, stoictimer, kwak73, Unintentionial Liar (I love your reviews…), Crimson Marionette, Reignashii, jasmenny, Lil'CuppyCakez, jayjawnz, Josher, Liliafax, bells-mannequin, hymnia (your reviews are favorites), vbabeofhearts, Leia1, anti, xxPiggyBankxx (you are great), hissori-yoru (love your thoughtfulness), iizumi842, Selina Reiji Hyuuga, the tumtum tree (looking forward to your next!), La Nuit Noir, cc, Imperial Inquisitor, Rin-Elwin (steady reviewer!), anAutumnLady, Sinewyk, Panbuukin, Beautifully Deranged, animekingmike, Derrand59, shkh4ever, Joy-girl, Azwraith, Irui, Yonis,

PastaSentient, 00-night-eyes-00, Michael, Darth Malleus, Nitramy, IVIaedhros, Teirce, Blade Redwind (always look forward to your comments!), divad relffehs, Rainy Verre, Tenshii1001, ijpowers92, braindead212.

Chapter 19

I lost my full time job. Fanfic writing = lower priority. Also, this story is just hard to write. It's always SOMETHING, isn't it? But anyway, I've finished another…long…chapter. Yay! Would really appreciate reviews. I've been getting favorites and alerts (thanks!), but only a small percent of these people comment (T_T whys?). Thanks, reviewers! It really means a lot to me. I really appreciate the different viewpoints, and predictions, and the concessions from people who didn't think they would like this story because it breaks so many fanfic rules, haha :P (OC-focus, next gen…I know, right? What was I thinking?)

EDIT: Dear SasuSaku fans, this story will not become SasukeXLucia…ever. Seriously. No. Stop worrying

White Rain

Chapter 19

By Zapenstap

Lucia couldn't breathe.

My baby.

At first, it was the only thought that stuck in her mind.

What have they done to my baby?

Everything else around her was like the whirring of a large fan. She couldn't hear anything. She couldn't understand anyone.

Vaguely, she was aware that she was one of the only people still seated. When Itachi activated the Sharingan, even her daughter had jumped to her feet and scampered down the aisle steps three at a time to hover at the front of the box, her chin inching over the rail.

Lucia sat frozen to the bench. Her hands were folded in her lap. Everyone around her was shouting.

It didn't feel real.

That isn't my child.

She could almost convince herself it was true. Out in that arena, she hadn't recognized him. Her twelve year old son, who had always been thoughtful and deliberate and polite…

He wielded weapons. He breathed fire.

Beside her, Ino had laughed with each jutsu, clapping her hands and exchanging commentary with the other Shinobi in the box. Lucia had remained silent, pride waging war with terror inside of her. Her stomach had felt cramped and her throat constricted the entire match.

It will be all right , she had told herself. *It will be all right.*

She had repeated it in her mind over and over, like a spell, or a prayer. But now…

Yukio was the only Genin on the field still on his feet. A kunai was held tightly in his fist. The blade dripped blood, her child's blood, all over Yukio's hands. The boy was screaming at Itachi "I told you to yield! I told you to yield! I told you to yield!"

And her son was screaming back. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

Itachi was on his knees on the ground, one hand pressed to his left eye. Blood was smeared across the whole left side of his face. The other eye was open, the Sharingan still intact, glaring balefully at his opponent through tears of pain and rage.

That Sharingan… red like blood, with the strange tri-split pupil, like a wheel within a wheel. Just like his father's…

She tried to think back over the last few minutes, but it was all a haze. Her heart had nearly stopped when she saw the Sharingan appear. She knew what it was, and what it was for, but she had never been frightened of those eyes on Itachi Uchiha. That was stupid perhaps, but it had been just her own life then. She hadn't been afraid, not when she was being tortured, not even when Sasuke came to her in the dead of night to ask about her history with his brother—not until she saw those red eyes on her son.

A deadly inheritance , she thought, her stomach cramping. *My son is burdened with a* second *deadly inheritance.*

The crowd had thundered in reaction, though whether in approval or detraction was difficult to tell.

And then lightning had blossomed in her son's fist.

"Chidori?" Tenten had gasped. "That's too dangerous!"

The Jounin named Neji formed hand signs. "Byakugan!" he said. From her seat in the row behind him, Lucia saw the veins thicken on his right temple. He was the one with the strange eyes, she remembered, eyes that looked blind yet somehow saw more, not less.

"His chakra is insufficient," Neji had said, staring intently at the field. "He's barely got hold of it."

Lucia didn't know. She didn't understanding much of anything she was seeing her son do. All Shinobi arts looked equally dangerous to her. But she had seen Itachi's red Sharingan eyes fixed on the other boy, lightning ablaze in his hand, his expression concentrated….

"He'll kill him," Lucia had heard herself whisper. She could see that much. She could see by his face that the other boy—Yukio—thought so too.

"No," Ino had whispered beside her. "Itachi? He wouldn't. It's just a match..." She trailed off.

Lucia's thoughts disintegrated.

But Itachi never struck. Somehow, her son fumbled the jutsu. The Chidori grew smaller, shrinking into his hand, eaten up by his palm. A jolt visibly ran up Itachi's his arm and throughout his whole body. He shuddered and pitched forward.

The thunder of the crowd swallowed everything. The sound of it was like a drug; even Lucia felt giddy with it. The shouting and screaming exacerbated her anxiety, but for Yukio, it seemed a different thing. When Itachi went down, the crowd roared and the other boy leapt forward, as if driven by a living force. Though for all the fire and frenzy in his expression, his attack was precise—aiming directly for Itachi's eye…that red, Sharingan eye. Itachi did not move to block. It didn't seem to Lucia that he could move at all. Yukio slashed. Blood spurted from Itachi's face.

The next few moments were a blur. Konohamaru called the match, shouting "Yukio, stand down!" but the other boy did not appear to hear anything. He advanced on Itachi, still armed. At the same moment, Rock Lee, who had been sitting beside Tenten, leapt from the box right into the arena. Lucia had never seen a man move so swiftly. Nor had she seen anyone make a jump from such a height and not break a bone, but Lee hit the arena floor with the softness of a falling leaf. He barely even seemed to land. As soon as his feet touched the dirt, he was a blur of motion.

One step toward Itachi was all Yukio took before Rock Lee grappled him from behind, trapping the boy's arms behind him and forcing his head and neck into a motionless lock. Yukio dropped the bloody knife, but he hardly seemed aware of it. He just kept screaming. "I told you to yield!"

Itachi's face was a thing of pain and fury. "I'll kill you!"

Sakura was at Itachi's side two heartbeats after Rock Lee pulled Yukio off of him. Itachi was thrashing, still shouting, one hand over his eye and the other slashing at the air with a kunai he had pulled from some hidden spot on his person, seemingly by reflex. Sakura shouted at him to stop and he went suddenly silent. The weapon fell in the dust.

Everything went quiet. Even the crowd hushed, the noise dropping to a dull roar.

Itachi's face was a mess of blood. His eye was hidden by his hand. Sakura leaned over him, her face pale.

In the calm, Lucia was suddenly able to breathe again. She turned her head, seeking the Hokage.

What have you done to my child?

In the adjacent box, the Feudal Lords were on their feet, both Lord Daichi and Lord Hiroki standing with both arms folded, hands hidden in their wide sleeves, arguing with Naruto.

Or rather, arguing *at* him.

"Did you plot this?" the younger lord, Hiroki, said in a contemptuous voice loud enough to be heard. "Is this meant to be a demonstration of your strength?"

Lucia remembered wondering the same thing, during the exhibition match between Sasuke and Naruto.

But no, she thought. She knew him better now. *I had it wrong.*

"That boy is Lucia's son," Daichi snapped. "Do you know what you have done, Hokage?"

The Hokage stood still, impervious, his arms crossed and his expression fierce. He looked at Yukio, at Itachi, at the other children on the field with equal consternation. After a few moments, his gaze

flickered to Lucia, perhaps sensing her attention on him, or perhaps because of the insinuation in Daichi's rebuke. Their eyes met. There was no apology in them. The Hokage's blue irises were bright with fire, not the fire of anger, but of passion—passion for both victorious and fallen, for the village, for all the Shinobi—burning hot. Lucia didn't know what she communicated with her own face. She didn't know if she had any expression at all. Her insides felt like ice.

"Itachi is training to be Shinobi," Naruto answered the Feudal Lords, but his eyes remained on her.

He's right , Lucia thought. *This is what Shinobi are. This is what they do. Worse than this.* It was not a revelation; it was a grim reminder. She knew exactly what Shinobi were and what they faced. She always had. But it didn't stop the tremors in her stomach. *If anyone is to blame, it is me. I wanted Itachi to do this. I wanted him to become this. I sought a Shinobi for a child. I brought that child here. I manipulated him into training. It's all my doing.*

The Feudal Lords were exchanging dark glances. Lord Daichi cast a considering look in Lucia's direction. Shikamaru began speaking, but too quietly to hear. It did not seem that the Feudal Lords much liked what the stone-faced Jounin had to say.

On the field, Itachi's teammate Haro was hobbling on his feet, one hand gripping his leg. He joined Sakura, looking down at Itachi with a white face. There were other medics on the field, Lucia saw. Amaya was being loaded onto a stretcher and Michiko was being carried off by a Shinobi Lucia didn't know. Yukio had fallen as silent as her son. He was still locked in Rock Lee's grip, but it now seemed as if Lee was supporting him rather than restraining him. At Konohamaru's insistence, Lee removed him from the field, half carrying and half prodding the boy. Most of the crowd's attention remained on Itachi, who had just taken his hand off his eye at Sakura's instruction. Lucia couldn't make out anything.

"Neji?" Tenten breathed. "Can you see?"

"It's not good," Neji said. "It looks like the cornea has been severed, and more of the eye besides."

"He'll lose it," Tenten breathed. "A Sharingan eye! I can't even-"

"Sakura might be able to save it," Ino countered. "She's the best surgeon in Konoha, and the only one who has much experience with the Sharingan. If anyone can save that eye, it would be her."

Haro was feeding a needle into Itachi's arm. Within seconds he went limp. Sakura rose, directing the remaining medics on the field; her expression was grim.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lucia saw the Hokage speak to Hinata beside him. In a flash, Naruto and Hinata were gone. Lucia did not see where or how and could not fathom why. The Feudal Lords seemed even more startled. They started to complain in loud, angry voices. The Hokage's stoic advisor, Shikamaru, looked irritated, though whether with the Hokage or the Feudal Lords was hard to say.

Itachi was being carried off the field on a stretcher.

My fault… Lucia thought, and then stopped herself. *No. My choice.*

Her voice came back to her with a sudden surge. She felt as if her brain was on fire. She rose. Everyone turned to look at her.

"Take me to my son," she demanded. Her voice didn't even sound like hers. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt so much emotion. Her voice sounded disembodied, like another person was speaking for her. "Someone—"

Ino was beside her immediately. "I'll show you the way to the hospital," she said. "Chouji, can you watch the baby?"

"Lucia!"

Lucia recognized Lord Daichi's voice. He threw her name at her from the Hokage's box—threw it in her face like a biscuit to a dog. He was still standing, arms folded in his sleeves, looking down his nose at her. She had never liked Daichi much. Ten years had not improved him. She couldn't believe what a pretentious fool he had been with her earlier, or that he would continue it now.

You fool. Be silent.

"We must speak," Daichi said, braver, it seemed, now that the Hokage was absent. Shikamaru shook his head pointedly at the Feudal Lord, but was ignored. "Your son's injury is severe. Do you now understand our reservations? Perhaps we should discuss—"

Lucia turned blazing eyes on Daichi. "Don't you dare speak to me," she said. "Not now. Not ever. I won't deal with you."

The old man blanched. Lord Hiroki's face was as white as a sheet.

She turned away.

Ino's eyes were as round as saucers.

Lucia walked out of the box, wrestling down anger as she pushed her way through the crowds. When people saw her face, they shifted aside. She wondered if they recognized her as the mother of the boy who had lost an eye, or if it was her expression alone that moved them. Ino followed her out of the arena and into the street.

"He's a fool," Lucia said when the woman caught up with her.

"Lord Daichi?" Ino said. She sounded breathless, not from exertion but from amazement. Her pale cheeks were flushed pink. "He's a lord. They're all like that. His family has ruled the Land of Fire for hundreds of years, since before Konoha even existed."

"He's a bigger fool for that," Lucia said. "My relationship is with his brother, the ruling Daimyo, not with him. He has no power his brother

doesn't give him."

Ino didn't say anything.

Lucia wondered if she should just explain and be done with it. Secrecy had been possible only up until the Feudal Lords actually arrived in Konoha. She knew she would lose her anonymity eventually. She had known it when she took her first step on the soil of this country, but she had hoped for more time. She had wanted her son established. But she couldn't control everything. She couldn't control the Daimyo sending these fools in his stead to "handle" the Hokage, if that was indeed what they were doing, as she suspected. She didn't expect her son to be maimed. Lord Daichi wouldn't keep quiet. Minimally, he would write the Daimyo. It was only a matter of time before everyone in the village knew who she was. Everything would change. And her son…

"I'm a fool too," she said quietly.

This confession seemed to startle Ino.

A wave of dizziness forced Lucia to stop. In the middle of the street, she halted, putting a hand to her head to try and stop the spinning. Ino stopped with her, looking both baffled and concerned.

"Let's go to the hospital," Ino suggested.

Lucia acquiesced.

The hospital was impressively modern for a small village, though Lucia supposed that Shinobi had need of good medical facilities. At the desk in the emergency center, an attendant dressed in white told them that Itachi was in surgery, but that they could sit in the waiting room for intensive care.

As they walked down the hallway, Lucia's emotions began to change. Anger receded into worry. She hid it as best she could, but she could not stop the shaking in her hands as they entered a

waiting room with blue floor tiles, white walls, and a few chairs against a wall. It was a stark and sterile place.

She stared at the double doors at the far end of the hallway. The doors had windows that showed another hallway, and more rooms. There was a sign on a hook: *Surgery unit. Do not enter.*

She sat in one of the chairs, hands in her lap. Her fingers felt cold. Ino sat beside her.

He'll lose his eye, she thought. She tried to imagine her son with a gaping hole on the left side of his face. *Unless Sakura can really…*

Did she dare to hope? It was all in Sakura's hands. Lucia would have given anything to the woman, any incentive in the world, but she could think of nothing that would make a difference. Lucia could only wait. She would be waiting awhile, she knew. There was nothing to do but worry and think.

She didn't want to fret about her son's chances.

She thought instead about his father's eyes—Itachi Uchiha's eyes. They had looked just the same—beautiful, but an eerie, dangerous kind of beauty. She had thought so the moment she first saw him. Itachi Uchiha had had the Sharingan activated when they met. He always had it activated, she learned, except during very rare moments.

One of those moments stuck in her mind like a tack. Since speaking with Ibiki, she hadn't been able to stop thinking about it —that night when it had snowed and Uchiha had stayed, the night he had proposed that they play that game. He looked at her with dark eyes then, like pools reflecting a starless, midnight sky; black as obsidian.

Why did he ask what he had asked of her?

He was a sadistic murderer…

So why did she agree?

Ibiki thinks I loved him, however briefly, or strangely.

She thought of the snow.

It had piled up high that night, the night she had pretended to love a man. She had "pretended" in earnest. Why? Why not? It was all she had been thinking. It was so easy to do—almost painfully easy. He stayed, and she had shown him affection and tenderness and passion until he had become weak from it, while the world outside that little house was transformed into a landscape she did not recognize by morning.

The coming of the dawn had been so stark, so strange, that the snow came to mean something to her afterward. In the dewy light of morning, the snow was blindingly white. It was so beautiful, so pure—transforming the entire landscape. Later, after Itachi Uchiha had gone, long after he was dead, the memory of the world that morning remained, having burrowed somewhere deep within her. White Rain… that was what she had named it—her hope.

If it comes down to it , she thought. *If I could go back and choose a different path, would I? Is it worth it? Is it worth my son's eye?*

How could she make such a choice? And for her child, no less, while she herself bore no injury... But she could. She *had* . The moment she brought her son to the village, she knew what it would mean for him. There would be battles, fiercer than this one today. She believed in her choice.

Not just an eye; a Sharingan eye...

Itachi Uchiha's face loomed again in her mind. It was a face carved from sorrow—sadness and pain deadened by the many footfalls of a man who just kept walking.

Did I really love him?

If he had lived, would he understand? Would he forgive her for what she had done?

Will my son?

For the first time in a long, hard while, Lucia felt the beginnings of tears, wet and hot, gathering behind her eyes.

I must not cry .

The door opened.

Ino jumped to her feet. "Sasuke!" she gasped.

Lucia's tears dried the moment Sasuke Uchiha's eyes met hers from across the room. She could never cry in front of this man, not knowing what he thought of her.

But this was not the same man who had invaded her home in the dead of night. That man had been arrogant and angry. He had named her villain and turned her to the cold—and her children too. This man was a different creature entirely. His face was so pale as to be almost ghostly and his eyes were…empty. She didn't know how else to describe it. When she looked into them, she saw only hollowness in the depth of those dark pupils, like a tunnel that went down and down forever into nothing.

What was he doing here? Sasuke had made every effort to disown all association to her family.

But my son has shown the Sharingan, Lucia thought. *What does that mean to Sasuke? What does the possibility of losing it mean? Can he stay away?*

There could be no denying a kinship, she supposed, even if her son should lose one of those eyes. But Sasuke had never denied the kinship—just his involvement in it. Yet here he was.

Lucia felt she must speak, but she did not know what to say. Since coming to Konoha, she had done her best to keep out of Sasuke's way. He despised her for her relationship with his brother, she knew. He held her in contempt for purposely having children by the man who had murdered his entire clan, and then parading those children in front of him, in his own home, where he was trying to forget. She couldn't blame him for that.

Ino seemed to have a different interpretation of Sasuke's hollow expression, though, and less sympathy judging by the tight line of her mouth. Nor did she have any trouble voicing her displeasure. She tossed her blonde ponytail over her shoulder, her hands on her hips, eyes blazing.

"How *could* you, Sasuke?" she demanded. "Chidori? He couldn't be expected to control it! He hasn't trained enough."

Lucia felt her stomach clench. *Chidori* . That was the name of lightning jutsu that had disabled her son.

"I didn't teach it to him," Sasuke responded quietly, focusing his eyes on Ino slowly, like a man coming out of a stupor.

Sasuke's eyes drifted to the double doors with the sign, and then to Lucia, as if he hadn't considered that she would be here and didn't know what to do with her.

"It had to have been you!" Ino protested. "It wasn't Sakura! And Kakashi isn't here. Who else could it have been?"

"It wasn't me," Sasuke snapped. Anger flashed in his eyes, burning away the sorrow. "Don't lay the blame on me, Ino. I was against this from the start. Don't forget. I was *forced* to train him. If it were up to me, he wouldn't fight at all!" That fiery gaze swung pointedly to Lucia.

Yes , Lucia thought, facing that stare without blinking. That was the man she remembered. *Hate me* . *The fault lies with me.*

Ino made a scoffing sound in the back of her throat, but she did not accuse Sasuke again.

Sasuke walked the length of the room, moving with a deadly grace that seemed unconscious. His eyes kept drifting toward the door with the sign, as if he were considering disobeying the directive not to enter.

"Sakura will let us know as soon as there is anything to tell," Ino said, watching him pace. "Don't get in the way. You can't help."

Sasuke didn't answer, but he seemed to agree, as he did not move toward the door. He merely looked at it, as if staring could make a difference.

The silence stretched.

At length, Ino seemed to feel that someone needed to speak. "I didn't know Yukio hated Itachi so much," she said.

Sasuke turned his face toward Ino slowly. "Hate?" His brow was furrowed in puzzlement. "Yukio doesn't hate Itachi."

A crinkle appeared on the bridge of Ino's nose between her brows. "What would you call it?"

Sasuke shrugged, though whether with discomfort or dismissal was difficult to say. "Not hate."

Ino opened her mouth, but Sasuke forestalled her with a look.

"Ino, I *know* hate. These eyes saw that match more clearly than yours did, you can be sure. Yukio is bold to a fault, but he was scared at the end of that fight. He doesn't hate Itachi. What you saw was desperation."

Ino's expression was considering, but Lucia was startled, not for Sasuke's analysis of Yukio, but for the tone in Sasuke's voice when he talked about her son. Bastard son of his murderous brother,

fumbled jutsu, loss of a Sharingan eye, and for all of that Sasuke seemed…proud…when he talked of Itachi forcing Yukio to desperation.

These Uchiha... she thought wonderingly.

Hinata stayed close to Naruto, shadowing him at the distance of a whisper, close enough that she might reach out and touch him merely by extending her arm. She was dressed for a festival, not a mission, but she managed to keep up anyway, following Naruto over rooftops in order to overtake the crowds.

He's upset , she thought worriedly. He hadn't said anything to indicate it, but she knew it was true. She could feel it. She always could. She was upset too, but the tension in Naruto was different- boiling high. All he had said in the arena was, "come with me," and she had followed without hesitation. She didn't even know where they were going.

"Naruto," she whispered now as he dropped into an alleyway between two buildings well away from the crowds milling around the arena. She landed beside him on light feet, sinking into the gray shroud of afternoon shadow. "Please stop. Talk to me."

He turned with the swiftness of a fox, grabbing her by both arms. His fingers dug into her sleeves, clenching her tightly, as if she were a pillar or a rail to cling to. His head bowed forward so that she couldn't see his face, but she could sense him seething.

"It will be okay," she said.

"I'm upset."

"I understand."

Naruto's grip on her arms relaxed.

"It will be okay," she repeated. She touched him lightly on the back of his neck. His skin was warm to the touch—it usually was, but it was particularly heated now. His heart must be beating hard. When she touched him, he lifted his head so that she could see his face.

His eyes were a deep, deep blue, his expression sorrowful and frustrated.

She really did understand. It wasn't the injury. The boy Itachi was not the first Shinobi to lose an eye, and he would not be the last. But so much of what Naruto valued as important, not just to the village, but personally precious to him, had been upset by the last twenty seconds of that match. In many ways, Naruto had identified with Itachi's struggle to prove himself to the village, so much so that seeing him lose so suddenly and horrifically within two heartbeats of victory was hard to watch. It was supposed to be just a match. And it had been, until the Sharingan.

Hinata still could not quite believe it. It had been so long since anyone had seen a Sharingan on anyone other than Sasuke or Kakashi. The emergence had set the crowd on fire and the Hokage shaking in the seat beside her…with excitement. The loss of the eye…well, it was a serious blow, if the boy really did lose it. Hinata wasn't sure he would. The damage was severe, but Sakura was skilled and the cut, though deep, had looked pretty clean to her Byakugan. Perhaps the eye could be saved.

Still, they had to plan for the worst. And she had to help Naruto see all the angles.

"The Feudal Lords reacted more strongly than Lucia," Hinata ventured.

"I know," Naruto said.

"She might be in shock," she said. "An explosion could be coming."

"No," Naruto said. "If there's one thing we can count on with Lucia, it is ice and silence. Besides, I saw her face. I sensed her feelings. She *is* in shock, but she sees a bigger picture, even in the moment her son lost an eye. I just don't know *what* picture she sees."

Hinata felt Naruto's frustration.

"And the Feudal Lords?" she prompted. The Hokage had not chosen to deal with them immediately either; he had just left them to Shikamaru.

Naruto's jaw clenched. "There's that business with Lucia, but I don't want to get into that with them right now. I'm concerned that they might take this match as confirmation that Shinobi are too dangerous or too unpredictable to be trusted. Emotion is high. They could use this to refuse all we have asked for."

Hinata nodded. Better to let things calm down and allow Shikamaru to feel them out first. Naruto could be too bold when he was passionate, and this was a delicate matter. It had been going so well, too. The Feudal Lords had been amazed by the proceedings of the match…at first. They had praised all the Genin, even Itachi, and especially Yukio, though they talked about all the children as tools for use, as Lords had talked of Shinobi in general since before Konoha existed. Still, their remarks had been admiring… until those last few moments, at which point they turned to each other and muttered darkly of unbalanced knives…knives that might turn in the hand.

If they do not think they can trust Shinobi to act with restraint, and on orders, they will do everything they can to diminish our strength , Hinata thought.

"We will convince them they are wrong," Hinata said. "Who are we going to see now?"

"Yukio."

"Yukio wasn't injured," Hinata reminded him.

"Not in body," Naruto agreed, his eyes shining bright in the darkness, though he was looking inward as he spoke. "I don't want to lose him either. Not over this."

Hinata fell in love with Naruto all over again.

Her Hokage was *so* unusual. When Naruto looked at Shinobi, he never saw tools for assassination and war the way the Feudal Lords did. He saw individuals-fighters and lovers and children. He saw suffering and he saw potential. He saw human beings. And he cared about them—all of them. Right now, the Hokage was seeing something in Yukio, something that perhaps no one else was seeing, and valued it.

"Yukio loves the village," Naruto said defensively, as if he thought he might have to fight her on the point. "I know he does. And the other Genin worship him. This match… Maybe I expected too much. Yukio is so young. And proud. He thought he was upholding the village's honor, and his own, by challenging Itachi. I thought it would be healthy to let them fight each other, to acknowledge each other, but..." Naruto sounded so frustrated that Hinata wanted to put her hand on him again, but this time she refrained, letting him talk. "I can't do anything for Itachi right now, and the other Genin have only minor physical injuries to recover from. But Yukio—"

"Yukio is with Lee," Hinata said. "And I'm with you, Naruto. Always."

Naruto stared at her, blue eyes brightening. Then he smiled, white teeth flashing as he grinned at her with that foolish boy's grin of his. He reached out to pull her head to his, and kissed her. "Can you find Lee for me?"

She nodded. The hand signs came to her as easily as breathing. "Byakugan."

With her Byakugan, Hinata was able to locate a specific chakra signal anywhere in the village. She made a slow turn, her eyes penetrating walls, fences, trees, and other solid structures, scanning

through hundreds of people for the unique makeup of chakra that signified Rock Lee.

"There!" she said before she had completed the turn.

Lee's chakra signal leapt out at her from the outpatient wing of the hospital, far away from the emergency room where Itachi would have been taken. It was an empty room, it seemed, except for Lee and Yukio.

"Lead me," Naruto said.

She did, exiting the alleyway only to enter another, taking side streets as much as possible to avoid the people who were starting to fill the roads from the arena. The whole village was buzzing with the results of the match and Naruto would not want to be caught in it. Hinata listened with her ears as well as she watched with her eyes, avoiding the throngs while keeping her sights trained to the target.

They entered the hospital by a side door, treading across carpeted floors in empty halls until they arrived at the door of the room. Hinata knew with certainty that it was the right room, but if she hadn't been, Yukio's voice confirmed it for her.

"You can't hold me here! I wasn't going to kill him!"

Hinata looked at Naruto. Looking grim, the Hokage pushed open the door.

It was a small area, just a waiting room for friends and relatives. The walls were painted leaf green and hung with painted pictures of calming views around Konoha-waterfalls and forested paths and high, empty hills. There were chairs here and there and books stacked on end tables. It wasn't meant for the sick or injured.

Lee stood in the center of the room with his arms crossed, watching Yukio, who was seated on a bench against the far wall, his shoulders

and head bent over his knees. The boy's hands and clothes were covered with dirt and specks of blood. Itachi's blood.

"Leave me alone," Yukio mumbled, not lifting his head to see who had entered.

"No," Naruto said.

Yukio stiffened at the sound of Naruto's voice. "Hokage," he croaked, looking aghast. "Why are you here? Are you going to yell at me too? I am Shinobi! Tell the Green Beast I am Shinobi."

Naruto was silent.

"You favor him, don't you?" Yukio accused. "Everyone says you want to save the Uchiha. You held me back, but *him* …" He sounded so bitter. Hinata wondered if Naruto remembered when he used to sound like that—back when they were Genin and Sasuke was everyone's favorite. "I suppose you want me to apologize? Well, I won't!"

"I'm here because I'm concerned about *you* , Yukio," Naruto said. And then more quietly. "You shouldn't have taken his eye."

"I *told* him to yield. I must have said it a dozen times!"

"I heard you."

"Then why—?" Yukio's hands were around his head, fingers clenched in his black hair. They were shaking. "I didn't break any rules! There *aren't* any rules. It's combat! And he *wouldn't* yield. What was I supposed to do?"

"You didn't have to maim him. The fight was already over."

"I couldn't be sure of that!"

Hinata didn't say anything. She saw now why Naurto was so adamant about seeing Yukio as soon as possible. The earnestness

in the boy's voice was troubling. She could feel his emotions from across the room—a tangle of hurt and anger and guilt. And he was proud too. Naruto had that right. If he was allowed to stew in those feelings...

"Yukio," Naruto said sharply, "Itachi fried himself with that Chidori. He couldn't move. And *then* you took out his eye."

"Taking out the Sharingan was the *best* move I could make. Why am I being disciplined for winning?"

"You aren't being *disciplined* . You are being talked to. You didn't break any rules. But Yukio, if you want to advance as a Shinobi, you have to think beyond winning matches. It's not about the rules. Itachi was no threat to you after he fried himself. That eye is an asset to the village. Technically, you won the match. You were the only one standing when the fight was called. But it is a *loss* for Konoha. And it is an enormous loss for Itachi. You need to see that."

Yukio didn't reply. He didn't lift his head either.

Hinata touched Naruto's arm. "Naruto," she said quietly, too softly for Yukio to hear. "Look at him."

Yukio's face and neck were soaked in sweat. He refused to look at the Hokage. He didn't look at anything except his hands, which were stained in dried blood.

He feels guilty, Hinata thought. *But he is fighting it. He thought he was doing something right for the village. Proving something. He's just a Genin. He won a match against the Sharingan. And now the Hokage is calling him down. And he's right in a way. If Itachi had been an enemy and they met on the field instead of the arena, everyone would praise him.*

Naruto seemed to understand without anyone having to explain it. "Yukio," Naruto said more gently. "You too are an asset to the village. You are extremely gifted. The other students look up to you and

follow your lead. Because of that, we expect a lot from you. *That's* why I'm here. I am personally invested in your future. You have jeopardized yourself."

"What?" Yukio choked, sounding horrified. "How? I didn't—"

Naruto pressed on. " *Listen* . You need to show that you understand that it's not about you. It's very important that the others can trust you to do what is best for all of Konoha."

"They can trust me! I fight *for* Konoha. I—"

"But you maimed a Leaf Nin."

"He's not a Leaf! He's a civilian!"

"Is that how you treat civilians?" Naruto demanded.

Yukio looked stricken.

"Think how it looks to others," Naruto continued. "To the Grass, to the Feudal Lords, to the boy's mother and sister. Even your fellow classmates. You may *think* you are being protective of the village, but that's not how you *appeared* . I thought it fair for you to test Itachi, Shinobi to Shinobi, Genin to Genin, but not to cripple him as you did. Being adamant that he is a civilian just makes it worse."

"But he doesn't *understand* ."

"He chose to *learn* . He has worked very hard to learn our ways. If you don't acknowledge him, why did you challenge him? Either Itachi is a Genin of the Leaf and you fought as brothers, or he is a civilian and you should have *protected* him. It can't be half one and half the other, chosen as it is convenient to your thinking. Not if *you* want to be a Leaf Shinobi. That is not our way."

Yukio didn't speak. His face was completely hidden now, the palms of his hands pressed against both of his eyes.

"Would you have gone for the other eye, if Lee hadn't stepped in?" Naruto asked quietly.

Yukio said nothing.

"Yukio—" Naruto pushed.

"I am *so* frustrated right now!"

Hinata wasn't sure, but from the tremor in his voice, Yukio might have been crying.

Naruto averted his gaze. "Hinata, Lee," he said. "Come with me."

Naruto turned to leave the room and Hinata followed. After a last glance at Yukio, Rock Lee came with them.

Out in the hallway, Lee's thick eyebrows were drawn low. "Hokage," Lee said. "You might want to know that Sasuke is here. At the hospital, I mean. I saw him when I brought Yukio."

Naruto looked startled. "Where exactly?"

"The surgery ward," Lee replied. "He was standing outside. I do not know if he is still there. Surely he saw the outcome of the match. That Sharingan…" Lee shook his head.

"He must have come straight here," Hinata whispered. "Lee was one of the first to leave the stadium."

"Lucia will probably be there too by now," Naruto said. He rested his chin on his thumb and forefinger. "Lee," he said after a moment. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Anything, Hokage."

"Can you find Ibiki for me?"

"Ibiki?"

"Yes. And bring him to the surgery ward."

"Ibiki, yes. I will go directly." Lee straightened, putting his heels together, and saluted. With that, he was gone, darting down the hall and out the door before Hinata had time to blink twice.

"Naruto," Hinata said. "Is now the time to confront Sasuke and Lucia about… about…." It was difficult for her to voice. Naruto had told her bits and pieces of Ibiki's findings concerning Lucia. Hinata found it difficult to understand, but she agreed with the Hokage. Itachi Uchiha was a complicated person who suffered and caused suffering, but if he was not sadistic, Lucia needed to be told. Naruto had wanted to tell Sasuke and Lucia together, but Sasuke had been elusive and reticent, dodging everybody since he had left Sakura.

"They're in the same place at the same time," Naruto said. "It's not the way I wanted it, but it needs to happen. It should have happened already."

Hinata nodded.

She fell in beside Naruto as he started down the hallway. They passed Medial Nin in the corridors and intersections. Most gave the Hokage sympathetic looks. Hinata wondered if news had traveled from the surgery ward and Itachi's injury was worse than she believed.

At the attendant's desk in the main lobby, Naruto stopped and inquired about the other Genin who had been admitted.

"Amaya Satou just woke," a rosy-cheeked Chuunin replied. "She already has a visitor—her father Sachio Satou. Jumei has been released. Michiko was recently attended to by a healer. She has many injuries but is not in serious condition."

"Haro Akamatsu?" Naruto asked.

"He came in with Sakura. The medics on the field gave him chakra-boosting food pills, with which I was told he managed to patch his own leg. Very promising, that one."

"Haro did do really well," Hinata murmured to Naruto, who nodded. Before today, Haro hadn't shined as obviously as the other Genin in his class. He had been resisting assignment to the Medical Core since his first days of Academy, trying to emulate Yukio's fighting genius like many of the other kids, but he was a gifted healer, and his performance during the match was really solid. His only mistake was letting anger get the better of him when Amaya went down. He shouldn't have separated from Itachi to charge Yukio.

"I think Sakura took him with her into the surgery for Itachi," the Chuunin girl told them.

"Ah," Naruto said.

Hinata nodded silently. It was a rare opportunity to see the Sharingan operated on. As Haro was Itachi's teammate, it would be invaluable, though as far as she knew, Haro did not have surgical experience. It might be hard for him the first time, especially since the patient was a teammate.

They left the desk and continued on. Carpeted corridors gradually gave way to tile. The walls in the surgery ward were sterile white and unadorned. At the end of the corridor was a pair of double doors leading to a waiting room.

The doors opened before they reached them, admitting Ino. She let the door swing shut behind her and gave Naruto an incredulous look.

"I was just going to come find you!" she exclaimed. "I can't stand it in there. I don't know what to do with those two. They won't even *speak* to each other."

It wasn't difficult to ascertain who Ino meant by "those two." Hinata looked to Naruto. His expression was set, the line of his mouth grim.

"Is there any word on Itachi?" Naruto asked Ino.

"No," Ino said. "And I can't tell how either of them are feeling about it. Lucia is upset, I think, but not as much as I would be in her place. She doesn't say a word. And Sasuke is almost the same. Sasuke says he didn't teach Itachi Chidori."

Naruto's brow crinkled in puzzlement. "Who else could have?"

"I don't know!" Ino exclaimed. "That's what I said, but he was adamant that it wasn't him. Sasuke says awful things sometimes, but he doesn't lie. Do you think Itachi could have learned by watching?"

"Not unless he has more genius than we know about," Naruto mused. "Or if he had the Sharingan already."

"I wondered that as well, but if he had the Sharingan before the match, he would have used it sooner," Ino said. "He wouldn't have allowed both Amaya and Haro to be injured. Someone had to have *taught* Chidori to him. Some *irresponsible* person." She sighed. "Well, I'm glad you are here. I don't want to leave Lucia alone with Sasuke. Someone must get them to talk to each other."

"Do you mind if I ask you to leave both of them alone with me?" Naruto asked, directing his attention between Ino and Hinata.

Ino shook her head. "Not at all."

"I'd like you two to guard the room," Naruto said to Ino and Hinata, "I have some news for Lucia. I don't want anyone to overhear and I'm not sure how Lucia's going to react. She seems to like you, Ino, so having you nearby—"

"Sure."

He turned to Hinata. His eyes said everything—dark blue, they were, like sapphires or the sea. She smiled her assent.

Ino would be there for Lucia, Naruto would be there for Sasuke, and Hinata would be there for Naruto.

A resolved expression settled over Naruto's face. Hinata had seen that expression many times before. It gave her confidence. He faced the double doors the way he did battle, ready for anything and determined to see it through to the end, and to victory, come what may.

Sasuke wasn't prepared.

I am never prepared , he thought. *Even when I think I know exactly how something is going to go… Somehow, I am always surprised.*

After standing for awhile, staring at the doors, he had seated himself in one of the chairs, on the far side of the room from Lucia. He didn't look at her, and as far as he could tell, she didn't look at him.

He was grateful. He didn't want this woman, of all people, to see what he was feeling.

There was a hole inside him. There always had been, ever since he was a child, but lately, it had been aching, and now it was starting to burn. He couldn't pin the ache on anything particular. And he couldn't seem to hide it as well as he had. Sakura's pregnancy, the loss of Sakura herself… And now Itachi… He had seen the boy grow, faster than he had anticipated, and had driven him away because of it. He had told him about the Sharingan, about his father's eyes, had done just about everything to encourage him to reconsider the Shinobi path, forfeit the match, and abandon Sasuke.

Don't be like me.

Sasuke had thought himself prepared for how the match would go. With *his* eyes, he had been able to see, to predict… He had been sure from the start that the boy would lose.

But he had not foreseen the emergence of the Sharingan.

My brother's son .

The thought was like swallowing burning embers.

There would be no turning from the path now. The whole arena had seen that eye. Even one intact Sharingan was enough. Itachi couldn't know it, but he would be hunted, if the boy did not use it to protect himself.

I don't want this. I don't want to feel…

Attached? No. He didn't want to *lose* .

Just the thought of family made him feel sick. All he could feel was the loss. It didn't matter who it was. Sakura... he loved her, had made her his lover, but thinking of her as his clan, or having a family by her… The very idea upset and disturbed him.

I can't do it again. I can't lose anyone again.

He wanted everything separate. Itachi Van Alstyne, his sister, their mother—that was one set, apart from him, distinct from him. And as for Sakura…

That child will be a Haruno.

But what if the child Sakura bore developed a Sharingan as well? There was no guarantee. It was a rare ability. But he had been just as certain Itachi would not...

I can't run.

It was a burning thought, like a red hot splinter in his mind. He had come to the hospital because it was very clear that he could not run. The relationship, whatever it was, was cemented by the emergence of that eye. Whether after today the boy had one or two Sharingan

eyes made no difference. He would be known everywhere as Uchiha.

Uchiha . The continuance of his name, his clan, his family. The thought brought heat—anger, warmth, pain…a great deal of pain. The aching, the burning… It was akin to a frozen limb, numbed to nothing from cold, coming slowly back to life. It hurt like hell.

He longed for Sakura, just the sight of her, the touch of her hand, the compassion in her eyes. At the same time he didn't want to see her. She was the answer *and* the problem.

He couldn't look at Lucia.

Why did you do this to me, brother? What were you thinking with this woman? Or did it have nothing to do with me at all?

Why she had come to this country, his village… He still didn't understand it.

As he was staring at the door to the surgery ward, the other door opened. He and Lucia turned to look at the same time, and their eyes met, briefly, and bounced away from each other.

Sasuke rose as Naruto entered the room. Lucia stood as well.

Sauske could make out Ino and Hinata on the other side of the door, their heads bent close together. Ino, of course, was the one talking. But neither of them entered the room. The doors closed behind Naruto.

"Why are you here, Sasuke?" Naruto asked him. "You said you were done with Itachi."

"He has the Sharingan," Sasuke said. The way he said it, it was as if he had just announced that Itachi had died and it was his responsibility to bury the body. Naruto only nodded, but Lucia's face drained of color.

She knows , Sasuke realized. *She realizes what it means.*

Naruto looked at them both. "I have something to tell you," he said. "Both of you. I was going to tell you before the match, but I wanted to tell you both together, and that hasn't been possible."

"My son is in surgery," Lucia said. "If this is about my session with Ibiki or anything else—"

"I can't do anything for your son right now," Naruto interrupted. The tone of his voice was grieved, not calloused, but Lucia stiffened anyway. Or maybe it was because he interrupted her. "I *can* do something for you. I've got the two of you in the same room together, voluntarily no less. I'm going to say it."

Sasuke was wary. He never heard the outcome of Lucia's session with Ibiki. Sakura had hinted that there had been some kind of revelation, but other…considerations…had driven speculation clean out of his mind. He didn't like being blindsided like this.

"Sasuke," Naruto said, leveling him with that famous blue-eyed stare. "I think Lucia should know the truth about your brother."

His answer was immediate. "No."

The look on Lucia's face… He had never seen anything like it in her expression before. "Truth?" she said. "What truth?"

"A classified truth," Naruto said. "Known only to the Third Hokage, the elders, a few others, and Itachi himself, of course. It was meant to be buried with him and forgotten. That was his wish. But things didn't go as he had planned."

"There is no reason for her to know," Sasuke objected. "Too many people know already. She is not even Shinobi."

"People know," Naruto agreed. "Many Shinobi who have no direct relationship to Itachi Uchiha learned of it. Sasuke, I want to respect

your feelings in this matter, but the decision isn't really yours. As Hokage, as well as your friend, I think Lucia should know. Her child has a Sharingan. Now more than ever I think she has a right, more than others who have this knowledge, many who are judging her as if she was aware, including you. We know Lucia can keep a secret. That is one thing we certainly know about her."

Sasuke wanted to shout. He wanted to scream. But shouting at Naruto would only result in his shouting back, and he did not want to be overruled that way. In any case, the words would not come. The boy *did* have a Sharingan. So he just stood there, his hands shaking.

"Lucia," Naruto said. "I think Sasuke should know the result of your session with Ibiki as well."

Lucia only shrugged. "As you will."

"Itachi Uchiha wasn't a sadist."

Silence followed Naruto's words. Lucia looked perplexed. Sasuke concentrated on regulating his breathing.

"It is Ibiki's professional opinion, given the information you provided against what we already know," Naruto continued. "As for what Itachi did to his clan, the Uchiha, his own parents—that wasn't murder."

Lucia's mouth parted slightly.

"It was orders," Naruto said. "A mission. From Konoha.

Lucia half-sat and half-fell on the chair she had risen from. "I don't understand."

Naruto kept speaking, his eyes bright and fixed on Lucia. Sasuke listened passively, letting the words wash over him.

"Itachi Uchiha was extremely gifted, and loyal to the village. He was an extraordinary Shinobi, and one who hated war. His clan, the Uchiha, were not of the same thinking. There was dissention, and a

plot to overthrow the village leaders. The result, if the plan had been carried out, would have been a slaughter, and the end of Konoha, if not outright war between the nations. Itachi was given a mission, first to provide intelligence on his clan's activities, and then to destroy the Uchiha when it seemed negotiations would fail. He was asked, and agreed, to take the blame, and leave the village forever. It was, in my opinion, the wrong decision, and the Hokage then opposed it too, but that's what happened."

"Impossible," Lucia said. "No one could—"

"It destroyed him to do it," Naruto told her. "He had to kill his heart. Later, his body began to fail, or so we think. He required medicine to sustain his life, medicine that you provided at the end of his life, if what you told Ibiki was true."

Lucia did? Sasuke thought, wildly disturbed. *No. That couldn't be.*

"Itachi only meant to last for a short time," Naruto continued, "Sasuke was left alive out of love, against orders, with the hope that Sasuke would kill him one day, avenge the clan, and restore honor to the Uchiha name. Sasuke didn't know the truth then. No one did."

Lucia's icy veneer thinned as Naruto spoke. Sweat popped out on her brow. Her distress was plain to the eye, even to Sasuke's regular eye. She breathed shallowly and quickly, one hand pressed against her heart, as if it was about to beat out of her chest, and didn't even seem aware of it.

"I… can't believe this," she said. "I won't believe it. If this is true…" Her mouth tightened, anger flashing in her eyes. "You mean to upset me, to make me think that I ruined him even more than I-"

"You didn't ruin anyone," Naruto said. "I told you already. Itachi wasn't a sadist. Yes, he hurt you, but not for the pleasure of it. Ibiki thinks he was like you-that he wanted pain for the same reason that you want pain, that he wanted… whatever you want."

"What he did to me was—"

"Torture," Naruto said. "Ibiki knows well what you described to him. I've sent for him. He'll tell you what he told me, but you might as well hear it now. What Itachi did to you was by the book, *Ibiki's* book, an ANBU recipe… to *withstand* interrogation."

Lucia was silent, but her silence was different than it had ever been.

She was in shock.

But no worse than Sasuke.

"Naruto," Sasuke breathed. "This can't be possible. Why—"

"Because she knows something," Naruto said quietly. "What do you *know* , Lucia?" His tone had changed. An edge had come into it, soft and insistent. It was almost a plea, or at least an appeal. "What secret do you protect with so much silence and ice? What drove you to *seek* torture? What do you *want* ?"

Sasuke was trembling. He wanted to sit down, but forced himself to remain upright. He had never considered this possibility…that Itachi Uchiha might be protecting this woman, that he might have been training her…roughly, but necessarily… to withstand darker forces in the world.

Why not? Why not? He wondered suddenly, frantically. *He did the same to me.*

But what did that mean? How did his brother feel about this woman? Or was it just what she knew, or what she was up to? To give her children...

It came together for him with a click.

"The inheritance," he said. "What is it?"

If that was her secret, they had had the lead all along. She had told them when she arrived, just as Itachi Uchiha had given Sasuke all the pieces—just twisted about so he couldn't understand them.

Lucia glanced up, and he caught her eyes. He knew immediately that he was right.

"You told us your children would be threatened because of an inheritance!" Sasuke gasped. "Something your husband Gehard thinks is his, but your kids aren't *his* kids, so that means the inheritance is *yours* , that it comes from *your* side of the family and will pass to *your* children, whatever their parentage. Your father had business in this country, business that involved Shinobi. You came here to finish that business, or to expand it, or end it. What *is* it?"

"You told me a secret, and now you want my secret," Lucia said.

"I want the truth!" Sasuke said.

Naruto held out a hand to forestall Sasuke.

Sasuke took the hint, swallowing, forcing himself to calm down.

"I won't force you, Lucia," Naruto said. "I want you to trust me. " He nodded at Sasuke. "To trust us. You seem to think we hate you, or would if we knew this truth. But we are Shinobi. We understand hate, and secrets, better than you know. You loved Itachi Uchiha…didn't you?"

Lucia closed her eyes. "It may be that I did."

Sasuke whipped his head toward Naruto, only to find the Hokage looking his way with absurdly calm eyes. *"I will tell you everything later,"* they seemed to say. Sasuke looked back at Lucia. Her hands were clasped in her lap, her ivory-pale face tilted down so that he could just make out the curl of her dark eyelashes and nothing of her eyes. With her veneer thinned, she looked like…

She's just a woman.

It was, for whatever reason, an agonizing thought.

How could I not see it? Sasuke thought. *I should have seen what my brother saw. I have his eyes. This woman, as stone hard and icy cold as she is, as perhaps she* had *to be, is still a woman.*

"Itachi loved this village," Naruto was saying to her. "Listen, Lucia. Whatever you are up to, it seems that you think it is for the best. Itachi Uchiha was like that too. You both suffered from a terrible secret. Maybe he saw that in you. Maybe he even knew what the secret was. He lived miserably and died painfully to protect his own secret. Maybe you intend to do the same. But sometimes I think that Itachi died for no reason. You don't have to do as he did. Whatever it is you are protecting, that you would suffer hate and torture to protect, you don't have to."

"You don't understand," Lucia said, shaking her head. "Ask your Feudal Lords if you want to know. I am sorry about Itachi. If I had known he wasn't a sadist, I would never have asked-"

"You can't take responsibility for Itachi Uchiha," Naruto interrupted grimly. "I won't allow it."

"You can't tell me—"

Naruto's eyes flashed. "I can. Because *I'm* taking responsibility for it."

Lucia's head lifted, her eyes wide.

"Taking care of Shinobi is *my* job," Naruto said. " *That's* why his kids, your kids, were let into this village. *That's* why I promised to protect you too. That was my decision. I did it for Itachi. It was something I could do. I want to know what else you are up to, but it doesn't affect why you are allowed to be here. You are here because I take care of my people. *All* my people. Let me help you."

He had pierced something in her. Sasuke could see it. There was a faint sheen coating her eyes, reflecting the light like glass.

She can cry like any woman too , he thought. *Did this woman cry for you, Itachi?*

The words came suddenly from his mouth. "Listen to Naruto," he said to Lucia.

Lucia's head turned. She stared at him as if she had never seen him before, at them both, united before her. She was bewildered. The sheen over her eyes thickened and gathered at the bottom, shimmering with tears.

At that moment, they heard footsteps coming toward them down the hall…from the direction of the operating room. The door with the sign swung open. Sakura stood behind it. She had her hair pulled up behind her in a clip, her body draped in medical robes. She looked tired, and frazzled. She had also never looked more beautiful.

My nephew , Sasuke thought. He had almost forgotten about him.

Silence fell.

Sasuke's breath stuck in his chest. He searched Sakura's face, and knew the answer immediately. She refused to look at him, but she looked at Lucia, and at Naruto, and spoke slowly.

"I managed to avoid complete enucleation of the eye," she said.

There was no sound. Lucia was staring at Sakura, her face and lips drained of blood. The shimmer of tears was gone. She seemed to be able to read in Sakura's face what Sasuke had read. Her son's eye was still there, but-

"There was penetrating trauma," Sakura said, "but it was a clean cut. I used a chakra technique to weld the split and reconnect the vessels and muscles to the tiniest detail. It went smoothly, but—"

Sasuke knew what was coming.

"I had to wake Itachi to see if…if it worked," she said, faltering only slightly. "He can't feel much due to numbness from the meds, and that scared him at first. I was standing right there, on his left side, but he…he didn't know I was there until I spoke."

Sasuke said what they all knew from the context. "The left eye is blind."

"Not totally," Sakura said. "When Itachi moves his right eye, the left one follows, showing that muscularly, the eye is functional. When I asked him to cover his right eye and shined light into his left, he could tell when the light was on and when it was off, and registered movement, but his vision is dimmed. He couldn't make out distinct shapes or colors and the periphery vision is considerably reduced."

"Is there a chance it will improve?" Naruto asked. "Can you do another surgery?"

"Another surgery would only add to the damage. All we can do is wait," Sakura replied. "Given the nature of his eyes, it may be that his body's own chakra can improve it. I don't know if the Sharingan will make a difference. It might, but I recommend that he not try for the time being. Not until the eye is healed at the very least. He should keep it covered and not strain it. Overtaxing that eye could lead to total blindness."

Sasuke noted that Sakura didn't say she was sorry. She was strong that way, professional, but her expression said it for her, especially when she looked at Lucia. She had tried, her eyes seemed to say. She was so sorry. Sasuke didn't know what to do. Sakura was kind—kinder than him. She looked both strong and frail standing there, her arms at her sides. He loved her. He wanted to hold her, but he dared not touch her.

I'm a mess.

Lucia hadn't spoken. When she drew air for breath, they all turned to look at her. "Lord Hokage," she said. "I'll tell you what you want to know. But first, may I see my son?"

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Itachi stared at the ceiling. It was flat and white and unadorned: a hospital ceiling. It looked harsh and sterile and impersonal. He hated looking at it. He hated looking at anything.

His vision had been halved. He couldn't see anything on his left periphery. His face was numb, but he could feel his eye with his hand. It was still there, in his head. It just didn't work. He opened and shut his eyelid, but it made little difference. He couldn't make anything out. Everything just looked sort of gray, like a curtain drawn across half of his world.

Haro was standing beside the hospital bed. He had been quiet, so quiet that Itachi hadn't known he was there until Sakura had said something to him. He had watched when Sakura tested Itachi's eye, listened when she asked him questions, and heard the answers. When Sakura left Itachi to report, Haro had remained. That had been some time ago.

"Itachi?" Haro whispered. "I am so…I am so sorry."

"Why?" Itachi asked. The word came dry and rasping from his throat. He felt disconnected from it. He tried to care about the answer to the question.

"If I hadn't gone for Yukio… If I had packed food pills…or if I had been able to fix my leg faster… I just… I thought—"

"It's not your fault, Haro," Itachi said. His voice floated to his ears-it sounded like someone else speaking. "I dropped the Chidori."

"It was amazing, though," Haro said, "while you had it."

Amazing. Itachi wanted to laugh, but the effort was too much. He could barely speak, and there was no mirth in the urge to laugh, only a wild sort of hysteria. Those seconds of amazing…they hadn't been worth half his vision. He turned his head slightly. He had to, in order to see Haro better. "You were right," he said. "The day our team was formed, and you said I was no good… that I shouldn't be a Shinobi-"

Out of his right eye, Itachi could see Haro's face—his stricken face. "Don't say that. I was being stupid. You…You have a *Sharingan* ."

"I have *one* ," Itachi said, again without enthusiasm.

Haro was silent.

Itachi didn't know what would happen if he tried to make the Sharingan appear again. He wasn't about to try with left eye all jacked up. Sakura told him he mustn't in any case, as he might make his injury worse. Gray shadows was better than blackness, she said.

"I was supposed to be a financial analyst," he said. "Or an economist. Did you know that? That's what I went to school for, before I came here."

"You are a Shinobi," Haro said. "You said you wanted to be, and you are, so-"

"-Or an accountant," he interrupted. "No one ever lost an eye doing sums."

Half the world will always be dark.

He knew he sounded bitter. He *felt* bitter.

Haro didn't say anything.

The door opened.

Itachi couldn't see it out of his periphery, but he heard the scrape and the footsteps. He smelled a hint of lavender and gardenia before he

felt a hand on his forehead, stroking his hair from crown to neck.

"Mom," he said, and it was suddenly too hard to sound like stone.

He was choking back tears before he knew it, though he only felt them in his right eye. He could barely see his mother's face through the shimmer. She looked right at him, serenely. Itachi knew he must look awful. Sakura had let him see his face at his insistence. The hand mirror showed an eye that had been cut and spliced back together. His eyelid and the muscles around the eye were swollen and made everything look misshapen. The white of his eye was red and the iris and cornea had become discolored. There was also a deep cut on his face where Yukio's kunai had bit into the skin, which accounted for most of the blood he had thought was from the eye itself. His face had been stitched back together with thick black thread.

His mother stared deeply and unflinchingly at his face. "You will have quite an impressive scar," she told him. "Sakura tells me you can't see much out of your left eye."

Itachi closed his right eye. His mother's face vanished, replaced by dark mass with the vague shape of a figure.

He opened his right eye. He didn't have the words to speak. He just wanted to rewind time.

"It doesn't look so bad," his mother murmured. "Once the swelling goes down, I don't think the girls will be too frightened."

"Certainly not Shinobi girls."

Itachi heard the Hokage's voice, but had to peer around his mother's head to see him. "Lord Hokage," he said. Sakura entered beside him, arms crossed, her hair pinned up behind her head.

"Sasuke's here too," Naruto informed him.

Itachi's heart fluttered, beating with life for the first time since he had opened his eyes to darkness. Sasuke…

He looked desperately for his uncle, scanning with his right eye until he saw Sasuke step forward from the shadow of the doorway, moving into the light on Naruto's left, between the Hokage and his mother.

Sasuke's face was like a stone. He leaned forward, looking at Itachi closely.

"Who taught you?" his uncle asked him quietly.

Itachi's thoughts chased each other. He didn't answer, suddenly afraid.

What will they do to Rina? he thought. *She didn't know. It was my stupid fault. She didn't know I'd try to use it.*

Where was Rina? He looked for his sister, but he didn't see her. His mother was here. Sakura was here. Haro was here. The Hokage was here. Even Sasuke was here.

She should be here. A vague sense of foreboding rose within him, like the swell of a dark wave.

She'll blame herself , he thought. Rina could be deeply emotional. She was so smart, but so stupid sometimes, if she fell into a funk especially. *After ignoring her and ignoring her, I let her teach me Chidori, and now ...*

He sat up in the bed.

"Lay down!" Sakura demanded. "Lay down immediately!"

His uncle pushed his shoulders down.

Itachi hadn't the strength to resist, but the urgency rang clear from his voice. "Where is my sister?"

The blood washed off easily, but Yukio scrubbed his hands beneath the streaming hot water for several minutes, long after the last of the red streams had drained from the basin, holding this fists beneath the faucet until they ached from the heat.

It's not fair.

The thought made him angry. What was fairness to a Shinobi? Was he a child, thinking life was *fair* ? He splashed some of the water on his face, but it brought the wrong kind of shock, making him recall how hot the blood had been when it splattered his face. The sensation brought a wave of revulsion.

He leaned over the sink, breathing deeply, fighting nausea.

You're a Shinobi. You're supposed to be strong. Don't lose it.

Instead of hurling, he stared at his face in the glass, looking deeply into his own eyes. They were dark gray, framed by dark, almost black, hair. He covered his left eye with his hand, and tried to imagine seeing the world that way forever.

It's just a stupid eye.

It would probably mess with his depth perception, though, and then he wouldn't be able to hit his targets with his usual accuracy. He removed his hand, staring at his face.

Ninety-Nine they had called him the first year he entered the Academy, because he scored 99% on every test except Genjutsu ones, and he only had slightly lower scores there because he found Genjutsu kind of boring compared to the rest. He respected it, but he wanted action, not mind games. He sought intensity and daring. He liked being challenged. He craved cold wind and rain, the heat of his body when he was sparring, and pain of a blow, the aching muscles of a day's training. He was a fighter from the cradle. Even his mother had said so, before she died.

Later, when he was bit older, they called him the Water Snake. Water was his element, but it was his fighting style that the nickname referred to, because of the grace and suddenness with which he moved, calm one moment and ferocious the next. He always struck at the right time, in the right place, with blinding speed and absolute accuracy.

Even taking out that Sharingan eye—

I couldn't have done it better.

The strike had been perfect. He had hit it just right, the sharpest edge of his blade slicing through eye and brow and cheek at a slight angle until blood poured, but just enough that the eye was blinded. His opponent had fallen.

Victory.

But the Hokage hadn't seen it that way.

"I told him to yield," he muttered out loud.

He had *expected* Itachi to yield. He had expected it at every turn of the fight, and been shocked when the kid *didn't* surrender, time after time, even with all his teammates down and his back against a wall, his chakra drained. The kid had shown all his jutsus too. Why did he keep fighting? What was he trying to prove? It was Yukio's fight. Yukio's victory. Stubborn stupid.

But he did have me on the wire after that, he admitted drudgingly *. That Sharingan…*

Yukio had never expected *that* , nor seen anything so terrifying. That red eye with the black wheel, all the lore he had learned of it… It all came rushing to his mind at once, clouding his thinking. The kid could see right *through* his jutsu. He had taken a hit to be sure, and then been forced to retreat, thinking, scheming, preparing… Then the Chidori…

He would have killed me with that jutsu , Yukio thought, *or tried to* .

Probably, Yukio could have evaded the Chidori. Even with the Sharingan, Yukio's taijutsu was better. Chidori was too direct an attack. Used by an amateur, he *could* have beaten it. He just needed to have better timing. It would have been a gamble, though, and might have cost him his life if he choked. He was thinking that, preparing to do what was needed, when Itachi had been the one to choke, and the crowd had roared, and Yukio had thought "this is it. Do or die."

And I did, didn't I? My "victory".

Not according to the Hokage. His career as a Shinobi… What would they call him now? Leaf Blinder?

He punched the mirror. The reflection of his face shattered. Blood poured anew from his fist.

He thrust his hand beneath the water pouring from the faucet. Fresh blood poured from the cuts on his knuckles and turned the water red. He shook the glass off his hand. Shards fell into the basin with little pings.

I won't allow it , he thought, gritting his teeth against the pain. *I will be Shinobi. A Jounin. A captain. More. I always succeed.*

But he didn't know where to start. This wasn't his usual sort of challenge.

He turned the water cold and rinsed his hand until his flesh numbed and the blood stopped running so fiercely. He then bound his knuckles with gauze strips—Jumei had taught him to always carry the basics—and stared at the mess he had made of the mirror.

I'll have to pay for that too , he thought.

He didn't always think before he *did* . That was his problem. He was smart, strategic on the battlefield, but *caution* wasn't his strongest card. His mother had said so too, with a strong frown and a shake of the head, telling him how she worried for him—fearing he would live a fierce, but short life. But she was the one who died.

I survive , he thought. *And I succeed.*

He stumbled out of the washroom and made his way down the main corridor of the hospital, moving at a walk at first, until his hand started to throb, at which point he began to run. He liked running. He liked moving fast. He wanted to *soar* . For him, things always became clearer when he was sweating and aching and tired from trying.

He slowed when he found himself in the ward for newly admitted patients, looking for his teammates. Michiko had taken some pretty rough hits. He wasn't too worried about her-Michiko was tough-but he wanted to make sure she was okay just the same. In looking for her room, he passed by Amaya Satou's.

He paused outside the door, looking in from the corner where she wouldn't be able to see him. She was sitting up in bed, her short brown hair disheveled, but no other signs of trauma.

Got her perfectly too.

Her father, the elite captain Sachio Satou was with her, sitting in a chair with his back to the door, talking softly with his daughter. There were tears in Amaya's eyes, but she didn't seem sad.

That's nice , Yukio thought abstractly, not sure why he thought so.

He slipped past her room and kept going.

Michiko's room was at the far end of the hall. The room was already occupied with a visitor. Jumei was there, sitting on a stool beside Michiko's bed with his feet propped up on the rung. Michiko was

sitting up, her blue eyes open, her long red hair a wild tangle about her face and shoulders. She and Jumei were deep in conversation. Yukio caught his name and paused outside the door.

"But *what* are they saying?" Michiko demanded in an exasperated tone.

Jumei sighed. "That Yukio's fighting skills are impressive, but there is concern that he lacks the judgment to lead, or lacks character, or commitment to the Leaf, depending on who you ask."

Yukio tried to remember if Jumei had ever said a sentence that long to him. Jumei talked more to Michiko than to anyone else in the village. He spoke to Yukio too, but only sparingly, in short sentences, and was like that with most people. Michiko, though… Well, Michiko was prone to talk *constantly* and wouldn't take silence for an answer.

"What do *you* think?" Michiko asked him.

Yukio leaned his head against the wall, listening.

Jumei was the most analytical member of his team. He was a skilled healer, but often said that the field made him nervous. He preferred quiet and an environment where he could approach problems one at a time. He aimed for a career in the lab, working for the hospital analyzing poisons and engineering chemically compounded chakra boosters and stuff like that, but every Shinobi was required to have field experience. Putting a risk-averse analyst on Yukio's Genin team was supposed to help balance them both out. Jumei was the weakest fighter of the group, but Yukio had learned to trust his judgment.

He had just never had it applied to him before.

"I wish I had seen what happened myself," Jumei mused. "I do not like relying on second-hand information, but from what I hear, when the Sharingan emerged, Yukio's actions were extreme. In my opinion, he erred. It is his vanity."

No. It was for the honor of the Leaf…

"Yeah," Michiko laughed. "Well, it *is* Yukio. You know how he hates to lose!"

My own team…

"He has a point about that Itachi, though," Jumei said.

Michiko agreed. "Every time I see that kid around I just have trouble thinking of him as one of us. He's gotten pretty good—I mean, he did get me pretty good with that fire jutsu, holy hell—but it just feels off, you know? Like I just don't get *why* he is training."

Yukio nodded. Yes, that was it exactly. Itachi Van Alstyne—such a stupid name; even his clan name didn't belong. It sounded more like he ought to be in a tea house drinking to the health of the feudal lords than fighting with Shinobi. He seemed like a nice kid and all, but he didn't *get* it. Even while fighting as hard as he had, with everything on the line, and even with the Sharingan, Yukio never felt that he was fighting another Shinobi.

But if he was just a civilian…

Yukio drifted away from the door.

He had meant to sit in with Michiko and Jumei and rehash the fight, but now he just wanted out of the hospital. He wanted to be outside. He wanted the cold air on his face, the wind prickling his skin and the smell of grass and falling leaves and the coming of winter in his nose. It would be dark out by now. He wanted the darkness too.

He pushed through the exit door and into the cold, shivering as he stepped into the street. The match had taken place in the afternoon. Night had fallen now, shrouding the village in shadow and silence. Yukio wondered if the practice yard would be empty. He would rather spar—to fight something, or someone, just to heat his blood, but target practice would do.

He was still wearing his ninja gear, so he started off toward the practice grounds without delay. He took the route that took him along the outside of the hospital. It would take him past the surgery ward.

It's just an eye , he thought. *I don't care.*

There weren't many people in the street, and the village seemed unnaturally hushed in any case.

That was why he heard it.

The sound was soft, like the bleating of a small animal, but he recognized it as a sob.

Curiosity drove him toward the sound. It came from behind a row of hedges growing along the wall of the hospital. He paused, slipping into the darkest shadow of the building, controlled his breathing, and waited to hear the sound again.

Instead of another whimper, there was a rustle. A girl emerged from behind the hedges, stepping cautiously into the road the way a rabbit might, looking left and right, and scrubbing at cheeks that glistened wetly with tears. She had jet black hair, straight and long, past her shoulders, and a face that promised great beauty someday, though she was just a child yet, with baby fat in her cheeks and big round eyes.

Yukio fumbled for her name.

Rina.

It was on the tip of his tongue, but he didn't call out. Something held him back. Well, many things. She would hate him on sight probably-he *did* maim her brother-but more importantly, what was she up to?

There was something unsettling about her posture and expression, which he could just make out by the light of the moon. Despite the tears, there was a resolution to the way she set her face.

She is doing something , he thought. *Or going somewhere.*

He noticed then that she was dressed for travel. Not only was she wearing ninja training clothes, but there was a pack on her back. And she was armed, as if for a mission.

She moved suddenly, swiftly, like a deer. Yukio was startled by how quickly she vanished into the night, but he saw which way he had gone and followed, curiosity driving him to track her, his mind racing for an explanation.

She should be in the waiting room, shouldn't she? Her brother was in surgery still. Probably that explained the tears. Where the hell was she going?

He followed her through the village, past the hospital, past the school, past the little house where she lived with her mother and brother, and further on and on, until the buildings dwindled behind and trees rose up around them. She past the training grounds too. Before long, they were on the outskirts of village, walking toward the northern border.

She'll be caught, he thought. *There are sentries.*

But Rina avoided them. She skirted well away from their posts, slipping through the forest undergrowth like a furtive creature of the night.

She's leaving the village, he thought. *There's nothing out here but the road.*

There *was* an invisible barrier that encircled Konoha. Yukio knew vaguely where it was. They were almost to it. No, they might be past it. The barrier was designed to keep intruders from entering Konoha unannounced. It rang an alarm when it was crossed—from the outside. Nothing happened from the other direction.

She can't be allowed to leave.

He didn't think. He moved. He was fast, and he was silent. He approached the little girl from behind, closing the distance without making any sound at all, avoiding even the crack of leaves and twigs by using chakra to cushion his footsteps.

When he was close enough to almost touch her, he darted forward, aiming to capture her in an embrace that would force her arms to her sides and disable her ability to strike without hurting her. He would physically *haul* her back to the village, deliver her to the Hokage, or her brother, or…

He caught her, but her body dissolved in his arms. It turned to shadow, oozing out his hands and sinking into the ground like a puddle.

A clone ? he thought.

But no. That didn't seem right.

Genjutsu.

He focused his chakra, snapping himself out of it.

"You."

He whirled at the sound of her voice.

Rina stood behind him, eerily still, her hands at her sides and free of weapons. There was less than four feet between them. He could disable her easily. Even with a Genjutsu trick or two, she was an Academy student, barely even trained, two or three years his junior, just a little girl… But she did not look scared. Her eyes were as dark as the night, as black as the sky, and they looked straight at him with undisguised loathing…and judgment.

"So it was you following me," she accused him. "I saw you."

She's sharp. And she totally hates me.

"It doesn't matter who I am," he told her. "Where do you think you are going?"

She didn't answer.

"It's forbidden to leave the village," he said. "Are you running away?"

Yukio had tried to run away from home once. He had been mad about something. He couldn't remember what now, but he recalled shoveling toy shuriken into a sack and making off for the great wide world, as if that was all he would need. He remembered feeling hungry before he got more than a dozen yards from the village. The patrols had caught him and sent him home. He had been four or five maybe.

But Konoha wasn't Rina's home.

He could see it in her eyes. There was an immense ocean of feeling in those big, black pupils. But she was silent.

Her silence unnerved him.

Normally, when Yukio was nervous, he laughed, or scoffed, or made a joke. When he felt threatened, he issued an insult or a challenge. But looking at this lost, troubled child, with her serious face framed in darkness and moonlight, he felt unable to do any of that.

"About your brother," he said. He wasn't sure what he had intended to say; a confession just spilled out. "If you want to know the truth, it was stupid, and I'm sorry I did it. With the Sharingan, and that Chidori...he might have killed me. I didn't want to lose. So I-"

"It's my fault," she interrupted.

He was so startled, he didn't know how to respond.

How could she possibly think that? It was my challenge, my fight, my knife, my victory. I blinded the kid. It was me.

But tears had welled up in the girl's eyes, giant drops that glistened like diamonds in the moonlight.

"He's *not* my brother," she sobbed, stressing the word, as if trying to convince herself. The diamonds spilled down her cheeks, merging until they became a stream of silver. "Only *half* . I…I am not needed..h…here."

"Oh," he said. He almost smiled at her. Yukio had only a vague idea that the girl's paternity was questionable. It was kind of cute that she was crying so hard over something so dumb. But he didn't think she'd appreciate his grin. He tried to sound as serious as she did. "Where are you needed?"

She scrubbed her cheeks. "I finished my piano composition," she mumbled. "I won't get to play it, but I was *supposed* to. They are touring without me. And I overheard… They've come here. *Anton* is here."

"Whose Anton? Your boyfriend?"

She glared at him.

He held up his hands. "Sorry. You were saying something about a competition."

" *Composition* . It's a piece of music."

"You want to take it to this Anton guy? You're going to carry it there yourself? Do you know where he is? How far it is? Did you pack provisions?"

"Yes."

He looked at her. *Smarter than I was* , he thought. *But she's still a baby. Poor thing. She's just upset.*

He felt kind of responsible.

"I think you should stay here," he said. "Ask one of the Jounin to take it for you. It's too far for a little girl. You're not even a Genin. And anyway, you can't leave the village. Don't you think brother will miss you if you go?"

Tears blossomed anew in her eyes. " *No* . I thought…I thought Itachi needed me. I thought…" She sobbed. "It's my fault. My fault."

"What are you talking about?" he asked. He didn't try to hide his bewilderment. "Look, Rina. It's Rina, right? I think it's pretty obvious that it was me whose fault—"

A new voice interrupted.

"She came after all, just like he said she would. But who is this with her?"

Yukio had been so absorbed by Rina's tears, he hadn't heard anyone approach. He cursed and whirled, a kunai coming to his hand from his sleeve. He stood in front of Rina, shielding himself and her from whoever—

Four Shinobi stood on the path. Three were male and one was female. Their forehead protectors glimmered darkly in the moonlight. They adorned with slashes in the shape of triangles.

The Grass delegates, Yukio thought. *When did they leave the village? Did they follow us here? Or…*

"Rina," the female Grass ninja said smoothly. "It was good of you to come. We can deliver your composition for you. Your friend Anton is staying with us. Along with your other friends from school. Such pretty performers. I'm sure they would welcome you. And your papa is there too. He is very worried about you. If you come with us, you can play your song and all go home together."

She said she overheard…

"She's out of the village," one of the males said. "There's no need to persuade her now." He towered over Yukio. His face was covered with a dark cloth mask that obscured his expression. Dark makeup matted the area around and between his eyes as well, making them hard to read, but Yukio didn't like what he saw there.

This one's a killer .

"Run," Yukio said to Rina. "Back to the village. These are not your friends."

Rina took a step back, away from the Grass, and away from Yukio too. But she didn't run.

I'm not her friend either, he realized. *And she wouldn't get far in any case.*

The Grass ninja were too close.

All four are Jounin, Yukio thought. His heart was beating hard in his chest. He didn't think about fear. He never did. A beating heart gave him strength, sharpening his senses. *I need a distraction, and even then the best I can hope for…*

It was all he had time to think. The Grass Shinobi moved all at once. Their speed was like lightning, too fast to counter. He heard Rina cry out, but he was more conscious of his own arms being locked behind him. His wrists were crossed, his hands twisted at a painful angle and shoved against the small of his back. He felt another hand cover his forehead and thrust his face up and back against the chest of a man half again his own height. He struggled in his captor's grip, cursing.

"Rina," the masked Jounin was saying, his voice a distinct rasp against cloth. It was not the man holding him—that was one of the silent ones. Yukio couldn't see Rina; he couldn't see anything but the stars in the sky and part of the hand forcing his head back, but he could hear her sobbing. The man in the mask did not speak as softly

or persuasively as the female Grass ninja. "Stop crying. We are here to take you to your father. That is our mission. It was required only that we bring you alive. Do you understand?"

Yukio thought rapidly. He was in a bind, but tactically... *I am a Shinobi of the Leaf...I can't give up. There must be something I can do.* His chakra was still depleted from the match, but not entirely, and he was still armed to the teeth. But his hands…

"A shame we can't collect the winnings of the bet," the fourth Grass Jounin chuckled, neither the masked man nor the one holding Yukio. "The little songbird exposed herself too soon."

"The girl will be worth more than the bet," the masked one said, "if Barculo has this woman figured correctly, she will pay a pretty sum."

"I hear she's an ice cold bitch," the female spat. "And she has a son still. A son with a Sharingan. One heir is all that is needed. The girl is expendable."

"We will see."

"What should we do with the Genin?" the one holding Yukio asked. He jerked Yukio so that pain stabbed all the way up his arms from his wrists. He was jerked again, forced onto his toes to keep his wrists and shoulders from popping. He gritted his teeth, swallowing a shout. "It's the one from the match. I recognize his face."

The Grass ninja released Yukio's head, but only to bring a knife to his throat. With his head back, Yukio couldn't see it, but he could feel the steel, the tip pressing against his neck just below his ear, ready to rip his throat clean across. If the order was given, he would die in the dirt, face down in a puddle of his own blood, having never uttered a word.

"Let me see his face," the masked leader murmured.

The knife came away. Yukio dropped his chin down, head swimming and vision blurry, but he kept his eyes open, glaring at the leader looking down at him.

Those dark-shadowed eyes gave Yukio one long look. "Kill him."

Rina screamed. From her direction came a blazing blue-white light and a sound like a thousand birds... Someone cursed.

Yukio was ready.

He used his feet, and his chakra, kicking against the shins of the Jounin holding him, hard enough to crack bone. The man released his wrists with a startled curse. As his hands came free, Yukio fell to a crouch, low to the ground. He flicked his wrist. A long needle, thicker than his littlest finger, dropped into his hand from up his sleeve.

I survive, he thought, and drove the needle into the soft shoe of the man he had just kicked, all the way through his foot, muscle and bone, and deep into the ground.

I succeed.

The man's curse became a scream. He fell in a tangle of legs, trying to move his foot away from the pain only to discover he had been staked to the earth. Yukio was in motion. He formed hand signs for the shadow cloak…and a water clone over that. His attention was focused. His hands did not shake. The other Jounin were closing in as the gray shadow wrapped him in darkness. In the dark of the night, he was invisible.

Yukio wanted to call out to the little girl, to tell her it would be all right, that he would be coming back for her, but he didn't dare speak. Instead, he heaved himself to his feet and ran, leaving his clone behind, pelting for the village.

They won't chase me back into Konoha, if they even realize I have gone and left her.

Behind him, he heard Rina scream again. Then, quite suddenly, she went silent.

They hit her , he thought, and hoped that was all it was. *They can't kill her. She's the one they came for!*

It didn't matter. He had no choice but to run.

I have to alert Konoha. I can't take on four Jounin. I'm not that *good.*

The Hokage should still be at the hospital. He might even be with the girl's mother, Sasuke Uchiha, and Itachi too, all of them there together…

He would have to face them.

But I was wrong, he thought. *And I don't care who knows it.*

TBC

This chapter is just shy of the length of the last one…not sure exactly how many are left.

Reviews Last Chapter: Thank you so much! Reviews make my day, especially if I'm having a bad day, and I had lots of those the last few months with my job situation. -_- I replied to everyone I could for the last chapter (yes…everyone…individually. Thank you very much!). If you disabled Private Messaging or didn't sign in, you didn't get a reply from me, but that doesn't mean I didn't read your review! I read them all. Many times. Thank you very very much! (esp Nia; your review was awesome. Maybe you can sign in next time).

Reviews This Chapter:

WAIT! Don't go! You want to review the chapter…right? Please say "right" :O. Here's some stuff to comment on (whatever you like or is most interesting to you…don't have to comment on all of this):

The end of the match from Lucia's POV

Lucia vs. Feudal Lords (revelations forthcoming!)

Naru/Hina (comments from fans of this pairing?)

Naruo vs. Yukio

Sasuke's reflection s - continuation of Uchiha

Naruto talks to Sasuke and Lucia of Itachi U.

Itachi Jr. EYE

Other Genin sprinkled in (Haro, Amaya, Michiko, Jumei)

Yukio!

Rina / Grass

Please recommend this story if you think others would like it. Because it's OC/Next Gen a lot of people pass it up. I think most people give it a chance because someone else recommended it. Thanks!

Chapter 20

At this time in the manga, it's *zombie Itachi* FTW!

Also, this chapter is… insane. I think. I've been staring at it for so long it's hard to tell anymore. Sorry it took so abominably long to put together. I lost my job, as you know, then had a stressful in-between job, then got a real job. Got sick twice. And I'm trying to move residences. So much time lost.

You might want to reread the end of the last chapter. This picks up right where it left off.

Warnings : This fanfic is for 16+ readers (rated M). It contains sexual references , mature themes (including sado-masochism...described vaguely but not "shown"), some violence, a very little bit of swearing, and other material. , This fic FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES for this site so please do not report it as MA. There are no explicit sex scenes. All such scenes "cut off" before anything happens. Violence is typical for a story about ninjas. There isn't anything extremely disturbing described in any detail.

White Rain

Chapter 20

By Zapenstap

"Itachi!" Sakura hissed at him fiercely. "Be still! I am sure your sister is fine!"

Itachi heard Sakura's voice, but it was Sasuke's face, and his uncle's hands pressing on his shoulders, physically holding him down, that kept him from throwing himself out of the bed.

"Has anyone seen her?" he demanded, gasping. "Rina?"

Since he couldn't get up, he struggled to see, his good eye darting around the faces hovering around his hospital bed. Sakura would have no idea where Rina was and her face registered as much. She had taken Itachi directly from the arena to the surgery ward. She probably hadn't seen anyone but hospital workers before five minutes ago. But his mother…

"I left her in the arena," his mother said. "She was with her teacher… Tenten. And the Shinobi with the pale eyes—Neji—and Chouji. But I didn't ask anyone to watch her. I didn't think…."

The Hokage jumped in, smiling. "We've all been distracted, Lucia. Don't worry. Hinata's just outside. I'll ask her to find Rina."

Itachi breathed more deeply, his eyes following Naruto as he opened the door and stuck his head out of the room, speaking quietly. Slowly, he allowed Sasuke to ease him back against the pillows on the hospital bed. That didn't relieve his tension, though.

Sasuke's face had not flickered a hair. His uncle's eyes were fixated on him.

Itachi remembered the question that had brought his sister to mind.

Who taught you?

Naruto came back into the room, shutting the door softly, at the exact moment Itachi blurted out "Rina taught me Chidori."

There was a collective gasp.

"That little girl?" Sakura exclaimed. "Impossible."

Sasuke's eyes only narrowed. "How?"

"I don't know," Itachi said. "She learned it by watching you, I guess. I haven't worked out how she did it. Rina is… Well, she's always been a little different, especially in the way she learns. I let her teach me because I felt guilty for not spending time with her. I wasn't planning

to use it in the arena. I don't know why I tried to use it on Yukio. I wasn't thinking clearly. It's my fault. Please don't punish her."

"Why would I punish her?" Sasuke said.

"You forbid *me* to learn it," Itachi said, startled that he would have to explain. "You said we aren't family, and you threatened me. You said —"

"That's changed," Sasuke said softly. "You have the Sharingan."

And then he pushed Itachi's limp hair out of his face.

Itachi wasn't accustomed to Sasuke being gentle or warm with him. His body froze up involuntarily, rejecting it as false. Behind Sasuke's left shoulder, Sakura was staring at Sasuke with wide green eyes, her mouth slightly open, as if the hinge in her jaw had broken.

But Sasuke didn't seem to notice he had done anything out of character. He was looking into Itachi's damaged eye, assessing it against his good one. It wasn't a sympathetic sort of look. It was more like a man evaluating a tool to judge whether it could still be used.

"There are some things I have to tell you," Sasuke continued quietly. "About my brother, and about the Clan. If you are Uchiha, you should know."

Itachi blinked.

If I'm Uchiha?

It was several long moments before he was able to speak. "What?"

His mother reached out to touch Sasuke's arm, but drew back at the last moment. "Is it necessary that he know?" she asked. She was very pale, her lips almost drained of color. Itachi felt a sudden pang of concern for her. She didn't seem quite like herself.

"Yes," Sasuke said.

"Once he has rested," she countered.

Itachi's eye darted between his mother and his uncle. Did he hear correctly? His mother knew? She knew something about his father and the Uchiha that he didn't? "I am resting," he said. "Tell me now. I want to know. Sasuke, please."

The Hokage interrupted, clearing his throat loudly. "Haro," he said. "I think you had better go. Amaya will want to know how Itachi is faring. Stay in the hospital."

Itachi had forgotten that Haro was even in the room. He heard the door open and shut, but he just stared at Sasuke, and then at his mother, and again at Sasuke.

Something had definitely changed since he had seen them last. For one thing, they were standing too close together. Maybe it was just his being in a hospital bed that drew them into each other's space, but he was used to seeing them at opposite ends of a room, his mother cool and aloof, Sasuke cold and angry—each freezing the other out. It wasn't like that now. They were both quiet, and they didn't look at each other, but the hostility… it wasn't there.

"What's happened?" Itachi demanded. "Sasuke, you told my mother something about my father? When I was in surgery? What did you tell her? Tell me."

Sasuke's face was blank, like a slab of stone, wiped clean of all expression. His eyes were black pools of emptiness. Sasuke often hid his emotions, and the expression wasn't uncommon, but something about it now made Itachi's blood freeze. When his uncle spoke, his words were like winter—deeply uncaring. It was as if Sasuke were speaking over a great distance about something to which he was neither connected nor interested. And yet…what he was saying…

"Itachi destroyed the Uchiha Clan under orders from Konoha. It was to prevent a coup de taut that would have meant a massacre in the village." Those dark pupils fixed on him…and seemed to look right through him. "He was not much older than you are now."

For a moment, Itachi couldn't speak. Sasuke had uttered two sentences…then one more sentence. Three sentences. Itachi thought over the words in order to count them. No one said anything for a long moment. Itachi tried to rationalize what he had just heard.

So his father wasn't a murderer then, criminally at least, but he had killed his clan, his parents, people he loved, because he had been ordered to by the village. Or because he needed to. If he hadn't, then others would have died, but…

I don't understand.

Another part of him, a third part, stood by, baffled by his involvement. Why did he care? He had never met the Itachi he was named for. And he had known already what his father had done. He had thought on it before, running idly through many scenarios, never giving any of them much depth of thought, for fear of how it would make him feel. He had in his mind a hope that his father had not been wholly a bad person, and that he would learn something about him he could relate to. That was all.

He was rogue because of this , he realized. *He was alone because of his. He met my mother because he was alone, and* that *is why I am here, and now…*

All at once, Itachi thought he was going to throw up. He was sitting up before he remembered moving, hands clenched into fists around his blankets, head swimming, gasping for breath. But there was nothing in his stomach to vomit. A heartbeat later and he realized the discomfort wasn't really in his stomach anyway. It was everywhere, everything—like the room was collapsing, like he was going to be crushed.

He didn't realize he was going to scream until he heard the words rip from his mouth. "He shouldn't have done that! You can't do that!" His good eye landed on his mother, her stricken face. He thought of every evil thing he had ever heard about her. It was quite a list. Suppose he was asked… suppose he was *ordered* to hurt her, to kill her, or Rina, or anyone in his family. "I couldn't do it! Mom, I would never do that! I-"

He remembered Yukio's words, striking him with the force of a blunt object.

You're a civilian! It doesn't matter how much you train! It's how you see things! You are a protected person. You don't do what we do. You don't know what it means to sacrifice. You have no understanding of what it means to be Shinobi!

"I don't care!" he said fiercely. "If that is what it means to be Shinobi, if that is the sacrifice, I wouldn't—"

His mother's hands reached him, cool as a cloud. "No one is asking you to."

"That is not what it means to be Shinobi," The Hokage said. "We sacrifice, yes, and sometimes duty is hard, but it's not about killing. No one will test you that way. Not while I'm Hokage. No one is going to ask you to hurt anyone you love."

Itachi stared at them both, listened to their words, still unable to think. His hands were shaking. "Where is Rina?" he asked again, more desperate than before, though he couldn't explain why. He just wanted her close, where he could see her. Her and his mother, and Sasuke too, the only family he had, right in the room. Anxiety was crawling up his back like a spider. He tried to beat it back, but it wouldn't go. He was sweating under the hospital sheets. "Why hasn't anyone found her yet?"

"Maybe she's not near the hospital," Sakura said. "Hinata is Hyuuga. She can see chakra through walls. Your sister will be found. Don't

worry."

Itachi looked back at Sasuke. His uncle hadn't moved, but some of the blankness in his face had given way. Beneath it was sadness, deeply etched, as if his uncle's whole being were carved from sorrow.

"There's more," Sasuke said. "About the clan, our history, my brother as well. You will need to know about all of it, eventually. You need to know because that eye is highly prized. Everyone will know you have it, and there are many who would try to take it."

"Take it?" his mother asked, rising suddenly. "You mean actually take it? His eye?"

"Yes," Sasuke answered.

His mother's already pale face turned a shade of gray.

Itachi didn't say anything. He had heard about this already, though the risk hadn't applied to him then. He didn't have emotion left to feel frightened, but it did occur to him that maybe it was fortunate if he only had one working eye left to spare.

"You must become strong," his mother said, as if guessing his thoughts. She didn't sound frightened. Her voice had hardened. Her expression was determined. "If the Sharingan is that powerful, it can protect you. It is a gift."

"A gift," Sasuke agreed, "or a curse. Either way, I will teach you to use it. You *will* become strong."

Strong.

"I don't know if I want to be," Itachi answered numbly. He looked at the people in the room, standing around his hospital bed—his mother, Sasuke, Sakura, the Hokage. They were all so *worried* . He could only make them out with one eye. The other saw nothing but

shadows. It seemed somehow symbolic. He thought of his father, of the sacrifices Shinobi made, his reaction, and what Yukio had said to him. Maybe Yukio was right. Maybe Sasuke was right. Maybe he should not have pursued this path. "I understand what you are saying," he said. "And maybe I have no choice. I just—I didn't know it would be like this. I don't know if I would have chosen this if I—"

"Itachi," his mother interrupted, and her tone brought him up short. "You *don't* have a choice. Shinobi or not, with or without the Sharingan, you are at risk. You *must* become strong."

Itachi was startled. "What do you mean? I am not frightened of Gehard anymore. If I met him again, I am sure that I would win that fight."

"You would," his mother said quietly. "It's not Gehard I fear."

Sakura frowned, crossing her arms. "What do you fear?"

The Hokage was looking at her too. "Lucia," Naruto said. "Who are you?"

For a moment, Itachi's mother didn't answer. She closed her eyes, dark lashes falling like feathers against pale cheeks. "It is not who I am. It is what I *have* ."

"Some special treasure?" Sakura guessed. "Of significance to Shinobi perhaps?"

"No," his mother answered. "It's not an object."

"Secrets?" Sakura asked. "Something about the inheritance? The money?"

His mother said nothing. She appeared to be wrestling with how to explain.

Itachi was still reeling from the news about his father. "We don't talk about money," he said, obeying some automatic impulse to respond

on his mother's behalf. "It's the first rule of our household." As soon as it popped out of his mouth, his mind started to race. He turned to look at his mother. "Why *do* we have that rule?"

He had always assumed that it was about politeness. It was rude to brag, and his mother was very keen on children—any children, not just him and Rina—not showing off their things, comparing houses, or anything like that. But now it struck him as peculiar that there would be an actual *rule* about it, or that it would be the *first* rule of the household.

"How can you not talk about money?" Sakura asked his mother. "That's absurd. Aren't you a banker?"

This time, Itachi kept his mouth shut.

Growing up, money was *all* anyone talked about. Before coming to Konoha to study jutsu, he had studied accounting and economics. At his private school, he took classes with titles like Mathematical and Statistical Processing and Asset and Securities Management. Coming home from school had been no different, because those things consumed his mother's work—poring over balance sheets and penning letters to brokers, underwriters, and investors. But that was the daily business for her clients. It was his mother's personal wealth—the inheritance or whatever—that they did not talk about. Itachi didn't even know that much about it, beyond that it was the source of his mother's infamy.

It occurred to him that in the past few months he had learned more about the Shinobi world, the heritage of his father, than he had even known about his mother's business. The thought brought a sense of disorientation.

I have no idea who I am.

"Why *did* you bring me here?" Itachi asked. "I understand why we left, but why did we come *here* ? It couldn't have been for my father. He is dead, and even if you loved him, you couldn't have thought the

village would feel the same way, even if it turned out you were wrong."

"I didn't know much about your father until today," his mother agreed. "I assumed I would be scorned by Konoha for taking up with him, and perhaps I have been, but that is not *your* fault. The reputation of Konoha's Hokage indicated that you would be given a chance. At the very least, I thought we would be reasonably safe here."

"Hmm," Naruto said. "Shikamaru said that you might have heard tales about my sympathy and concocted a sad story about abuse so that I would let you into the village." The Hokage's blue eyes fixed on her. "Is that true?"

"I heard stories," she answered, shrugging, "but I didn't know what to believe. When we met, I had the impression that you were either very cunning or very foolish. I think I misunderstood you. I am not sure that I understand you even now."

"Naruto *can* be foolish," Sakura muttered. "Well, sometimes," she amended. "But we all trust him, every Shinobi in Konoha, and Shinobi in other villages too. That should be enough to earn your trust too."

"Ah," Naruto said, looking slightly embarrassed, but a little touched too. "Lucia, I am not sure I understand you entirely either, but I am sincere in my promise to help you if I can."

" *That* is foolish," his mother answered. "If I could advise you, I would say that you should promise me no such thing, or trust me, even if you believe that I mean well."

Naruto seemed taken aback.

Itachi was a little bewildered himself. "Mom…?"

"I will make no promises to you or to Konoha," she added. "I will say only that I mean Konoha no harm."

"We can't accept that," Sakura said. "Naruto, explain to her what we can *do* if we dislike what she—"

"It doesn't matter," Sasuke interrupted.

His mother turned dark, startled eyes on Sasuke. She wasn't the only one. Sasuke had been so quiet, it was almost like he wasn't there.

"Itachi trusted you," Sasuke said. "That is enough for me."

For a moment, Itachi was confused. Then he realized that Sasuke wasn't talking about him. He was talking about his father, Sasuke's brother.

"Itachi Uchiha?" his mother asked. "Trust me? I doubt that he trusted anyone."

"He trusted you enough," Sasuke said. "It has to be that. All this time, since you arrived here, I've been thinking that you must have been a mere distraction to him, but it didn't make sense. Itachi was not a man for distractions. There was little he did that did not have a direct purpose, and he had such little time left in the world. Why waste it on a woman?"

"I don't know," Lucia said.

"He always thought ahead," Sasuke whispered. "Maybe he foresaw that you would come to Konoha, that you would bring your children here. Maybe he couldn't really know, but he must have considered it. As a possibility. He would realize that you and I would meet someday. Word of an Uchiha child would spread. I would seek you out if you did not come to me. Itachi would have made an effort to discover your agenda, in order to know how I would react. I doubt he was unsuccessful."

His mother's brow furrowed. "You think he knew my plans? And somehow, that makes you trust me?"

Sasuke looked her full in the face. "Because he knew that if I opposed it, I would kill you."

His mother's expression was like a stone wall. "That—"

"Nothing would have stopped me."

A sliver of cold slid down Itachi's back. *No. You wouldn't. You couldn't.* But looking into his uncle's eyes, he saw that he certainly could.

The Hokage opened his mouth, but Sasuke held out a hand to forestall him. "No, Naruto, not even you. I might not even have hesitated. But Itachi left me a mystery, a puzzle to solve. There were *children* , not just one, but two, and he knew I would be forced to pause long enough to figure out why."

"Rina was not planned," Itachi's mother whispered.

"Not by you."

Lucia's eyes widened.

"She is Itachi's choice," Sasuke said. "Before today, I didn't want to believe that. I didn't even want to consider it, but when I take my personal feelings out of it, it seems clear enough."

Itachi's mother swayed on her feet. "That's…" A laugh escaped her lips. But it was a laugh with no humor in it. It was more like a gasp or a cry that just happened to crack her face in the shape of a smile. She shook her head, dark waves of hair swaying against her cheeks, obscuring her face. "Gehard will be disappointed," she said. "He is fond of Rina, but I—" Her voice sounded far away, as if she didn't really know what she was saying. "I remember it clearly—how I felt when I realized I was going to have a little girl, how much I-" As if thinking she had said too much, she stopped speaking abruptly and closed her eyes. It almost seemed as if she were sinking deeply into

some memory. Whatever she saw unbalanced what remained of her composure. Her hands clenched. "But he was dead."

Is she going to cry? Itachi sat up a little straighter in bed, worried. His mother was often sad. Sometimes she seemed cloaked in sadness, but it was more of an impression than a display. He never saw her cry, but he could see the beginnings of tears now, tiny spheres of water glistening with light in the corners of her eyes. It unnerved him to see his mother show her feelings so plainly.

"Lucia," Sasuke's tone had changed. It retained its hard, determined edge, but wasn't so cold. "Itachi was not prone to *accidents* . If you had Uchiha children, it was because my brother wanted you to have them. I think that whatever your plans, however they involve Konoha, Itachi must have *supported* it. Or at least he did not oppose it. He must have thought I would feel the same way. Nothing else makes sense."

His mother looked at Sasuke. There was so much feeling in her face, Itachi was taken aback. "Even if what you say is true, even if Itachi really did support it…" She trailed off, looking down. She looked… embarrassed. "Do you think that you and I could talk? About Itachi? I know that isn't what you want, and maybe now is not the right time, but there is so much I want to know about him, and-" She looked up. The expression on Sasuke's face made her draw back.

Sasuke looked like someone had hit him. His eyes were wide, his eyebrows pulled low. He held himself stiffly, his posture held slightly back, as if the words pouring from Lucia's mouth were somehow attacking him.

Sobriety came swiftly to his mother's voice. Her tone cooled instantly. Her eyes dried. "That was presumptuous. Forgive me."

There was a moment of silence and then his mother turned to the Hokage. "The inheritance is nothing mystical. It is money. Just…a lot of money."

Itachi blinked. How was that news?

"But we already knew that," Sakura said, looking as confused as he felt. "That isn't a mystery at all. You told us so yourself, and even if you hadn't, it is obvious. You dress in expensive clothes. You make your living as a banker. You told us you left behind a fortune. What's the secret?"

She didn't leave anything , Itachi thought. That, at least, was a secret he knew. *The fortune is still hers. It's always about money with her.*

"You don't understand," his mother answered. "It's more than you think."

"So you are fabulously wealthy," Naruto concluded. "I still don't get it."

"Because you don't understand wealth," his mother pressed. "You understand it about as well as I understand jutsu."

Itachi wondered if Naruto would be insulted by this comment. His mother's understanding of jutsu was pretty dismal. But then, he supposed her ignorance was largely circumstantial. Jutsu had little to do with her way of life. Was that what she meant? Ninja used money and trade just like any society, but if he thought about it, Itachi supposed that it was less important to them than most people, just as ninja arts were mysterious to most people.

Naruto didn't look insulted. He just looked puzzled.

A commotion outside the hospital room drew everyone's attention to the door.

Ino's voice could be heard clearly, rising shrilly in complaint.

The door opened. Itachi felt shocked. It was Yukio who pushed through, Ino's hand gripped on his shoulder, her mouth tight. His reaction was instinct, leaning away, one hand flying to his eye.

"Hokage, he insisted!" Ino gasped. "I told him that Itachi wouldn't want to see him, even if he came with some apology, and that you were in private conversation, but he—"

"It's not about his dumb eye!" Yukio burst out, yanking his arm free from Ino's hand. "It's his sister. Rina." Yukio looked Itachi right in the face. "She's been taken by the Grass."

Itachi's heart beat twice in his chest—two heavy thuds—and then stopped. For a moment, no one said anything. Itachi's heart began to race.

There was blood on Yukio's clothes. It wasn't Itachi's blood from the arena, but fresh blood, so fresh that Itachi could smell the iron in it.

"What?" Itachi said quietly. He could barely hear his own voice through the roaring in his ears.

Confusion muddled his thinking. He sat up straight, swung his legs off the bed, and was overcome by a wave of dizziness.

"I followed her," Yukio explained. "The Grass were waiting for her on the border-"

"That doesn't make sense," Sasuke interrupted coolly. "Why would she leave the village? She is a child. That is foolish. And forbidden."

"She was upset," Yukio said. "About her brother, and belonging here, I guess. I—"

"If she had some problem, there is more help for her in the village than outside of it."

Sakura gasped. "Sasuke, are you *listening* to yourself? *You* ?"

Sasuke looked stricken.

"What did Rina say?" Sakura demanded.

"She mentioned someone named Anton and a competition," Yukio said.

"Composition," Itachi heard himself correct. It was still hard to think, but his brain seemed to be doing it without him, filling in the blanks and spitting out words. Anton was Rina's classmate in the special music program she was enrolled in. He was a weird kid, even weirder than Rina, but a kind of musical genius, and Rina had always been a little enamored of him. Itachi's tongue seemed to be working without him too. "Her music score, the one she was going to perform. Gehard must have brought Rina's tour group here, to lure her out."

"The Grass has been talking to her," Yukio said. "Or that's what it seemed like to me."

My fault, Itachi thought, thinking of all those hours that Rina had been alone while he trained. Who knew what had been doing or who she had been talking to? *Because I ignored her…*

The sickening feeling in his stomach was nothing compared to the guttural cry that ripped suddenly from his mother's throat. She had been like a statue, pale to whiteness, not speaking. The sound was like something had shattered. His mother had broken.

If Itachi's body was working slowly before, it leaped into furious action now. He was out of bed, the tiles cold under his bare feet, and reaching for his mother, instinctively seeking to soothe the panic that was so unlike her, but his muscles wouldn't obey. He could barely stand up, and half fell against the side of the mattress, his head swimming. His mother's savage cry had transformed into a torrent of shouts that assaulted Itachi's mind like a storm of needles.

"They will kill her! They will kill her! Gerhard, you fucking *idiot* ."

"No one will kill Rina," Naruto said, his voice deadly calm, cutting through his mother's cries like steel. "I won't allow it."

"They *can't* kill her," Sakura said. "It is you they want, Lucia. Rina is bait. We have time. They will send a negotiator—"

"Like the Cloud did for Hinata," Ino agreed.

But his mother would not calm down. "No," she gasped. "No. You don't understand. There is no negotiation. Not with these people. Not when it has gone this far. There is only leverage."

"We have leverage," Naruto said. "Konoha is bigger than the Grass."

Itachi's mother's eyes flashed. "You will send a letter! They will hack off Rina's fingers and send them to me in box!"

Sakura gasped.

"Whatever it takes," his mother shouted, "until I break and give them anything they ask!" Tears streamed openly down her cheeks, mixing with the anger and fear on her face until her expression resembled nothing Itachi had ever seen from her. He had no idea what to do or how to help. He just clung to the edge of the bed, his body shaking, his mother's cries ringing in his ears. "And I *can't* give them what they ask," she wept. "It was supposed to be me. If anyone, it was to be me."

"Gehard would not allow the Grass to harm Rina!" Ino objected, sounding aghast. "He is their client and Rina is his daughter, as far as he knows. I understand your fears, but what you are saying is extreme, even for Shinobi—"

But Itachi's mother just shook her head. "Not the Grass. Not Gehard. The Higher Houses. The Grass is just the instrument they will use. Gehard never understood. He always turned a blind eye to it. They will torture Rina to terrorize me. And then they will kill her when I don't yield-" She cried. "I *can't* yield."

Her cries were like drum beats in Itachi's head, pounding against the inside of his skull. *Do something. Do something.*

"No one is going to harm Rina," the Hokage said. His voice was quiet, calm…ominously so, but his blue eyes blazed. "I *promise* you, Lucia."

But his mother seemed to beyond hearing.

"What happened, Yukio?" Ino demanded. "Explain it fully!"

"I ran into Rina by the hospital," Yukio said. "She told me Itachi's eye was her fault and that she was leaving the village. I tried to talk her out of it, but she wouldn't listen to me. I followed her and tried to stop her, but she evaded with a Genjutsu." He frowned at Itachi. "Did you teach her that? You didn't use it in the arena."

"No," Itachi said, finding it hard to listen, much less speak. How could Rina think that losing his eye was her fault? "No, I didn't teach her. I don't know Genjutsu. I don't know how Rina learns anything."

But he wasn't surprised. Genjutsu was creative. Rina was creative.

My fault.

"Where did this happen?" Ino demanded.

"The northern border," Yukio replied. "The Grass seized both of us. And they weren't kidding around. They had a knife to my throat. They were going to kill me. Rina did something with lightning. I didn't get a good look at it, but it sounded like Chidori. It distracted the Grass and I was able to fight free. They didn't chase me."

"No, of course not. Why would they?" Sakura muttered. "They would expect pursuit as soon as we realized Rina was missing. They are probably long gone. They would have had a plan. I'll bet they used a transportation jutsu. There are Shinobi with that ability."

"We'll scour the area anyway," Naruto said. "Sasuke—" He stopped short.

Itachi looked for his uncle. He looked around the room twice, bewildered.

But Sasuke was gone.

"When did he leave?" Sakura demanded.

Naruto cursed.

" *I'll* go look for Rina," Ino offered.

"You'll need help," Sakura said. "I can go with you. Naruto—"

But at that moment, Rock Lee strolled into the hospital room with Konoha's interrogator, Ibiki, close on his heels. Neji Hyuuga was with them too. Surprise flickered across Lee's face when he saw Yukio standing inside the doorway, but did not seem to know that anything was amiss. None of them seemed to be in any particular hurry. They pulled up short when they saw Naruto's face.

"What's going on?" Neji asked.

"Something just happened," the Hokage said. "Neji, I have need of your eyes, and Lee, your speed. Sakura, I know you want to come but I prefer you stay here. I will need you close. I have a request of Ibiki. So, Ino—"

"I've got it," Ino said, moving toward the door. "Lee, Neji, follow me. I'll explain on the way."

The three of them moved so fast it was like they vanished.

"Ibiki," Naruto said when they were gone. "I asked Lee to bring you here to tell Lucia what you told me earlier, but now I have something more important. I need you to find Shikamaru for me, and to gather the Jounin."

"Shikamaru is with the feudal lords. They are not very happy with you. Which Jounin?"

"All of them," Naruto said. "Every Jounin in the village. Chuunin too. Konoha is on lockdown. No one leaves without my say-so. All missions are suspended."

Ibiki's eyebrows climbed up his head. "May I ask why?"

"The Grass have left the Leaf," the Hokage answered. "And they threw a gauntlet on their way out." His voice was grim. "I need to talk to Shikamaru. The Feudal Lords can wait. We must decide how Konoha will respond."

Ibiki looked grim, but he gave Naruto a curt nod and left the room.

Itachi's mother was still crying.

Itachi broke the silence. "I'm going," he said. He forced himself upright, pushing away from the bed. "If there's a strike team, or a battle, or…whatever it is that you decide…I'm going. I'm on the team."

"Itachi, no!" Sakura snapped at him. "We have Shinobi enough. You are injured. You can't go."

"It has to be me," he gasped. "It's my fault. Rina didn't understand. You don't know her like I do. She is *really* smart, smarter than me, but she can be so *stupid* sometimes. She's so creative. When she gets emotional, she can imagine things. She gets confused. She's convinced herself I don't care about her, but she's... I love her. Please, Hokage. I have to go."

He remembered one time when Rina was just a bit younger and she ran into his room in the middle of the night crying because she had some nightmare. It took him an hour to convince her that she had dreamed it. Her imagination was so vivid. All the brilliance in her music and poetry came from that place, but it was so *real* to her. He could get frustrated with her sometimes, because she would occasionally fall into dark moods and be angry and sullen with the people around her for imagined slights that made no sense to

anyone but her. She needed him to reason with her and tell her when she was being silly, because she could get so lost in her thoughts and feelings.

I didn't take care of her properly. I know how she's different. I know how she thinks and how she feels and I knew she needed me, and I made her feel alone. I forgot about her. I ignored her. It's my fault. I will never forgive myself if something happens to her.

"Itachi, I understand your feelings," Sakura said, "but your eye—"

"I'll keep it bandaged."

"If you go into the field, you could very easily damage it worse! Beyond my ability to heal. Very easily!"

Itachi didn't even have to think about it. "I can live with one working eye."

"And if the other one stops working in sympathy?"

At this, he was silent. His mother said nothing either. She did not seem to have any tears left. She just stood there, looking right at him, visibly shaking. She couldn't absorb anymore.

"It's been known to happen," Sakura told him. "I didn't tell you because I didn't want to scare you, but if you lose all functionality in your left eye, your right might get confused and give up too. You will be blind. Totally blind. Do you understand? You stand a chance of recovery right now. If you do ANY damage to it, I will have to remove the left eye totally."

Itachi's breath felt constricted, even though his chest was rising and falling. He looked at Sakura, at his mother, at Naruto, and finally at Yukio standing in the door. Something about Yukio's expression made him stare at the other boy the longest. Yukio was the one who had hurt his eye, the one he was supposed to hate. And he just

stood there, unblinking, focused, no obvious emotion. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe it was callousness, and yet…

"That's the sacrifice," he realized out loud, speaking quietly. "That's what it means to be a Shinobi." *It's about what is really important. Not the village itself, but the* people *in the village. Rina.* He looked Yukio straight in the face, and felt his own expression mirror it. "I'm *not* a protected person! I am on this mission."

In answer, Yukio pulled the cowl around his neck up over his face, tucking into his hood, shrouding his expression so that only his eyes showed. "I'll get our teams ready."

The Hokage's lips twitched into a smile.

Sakura saw it. "Naruto, this is crazy," she objected. "I know you want to encourage them, and I appreciate their zeal, but we don't need six Genin for a mission this sensitive! We shouldn't have any. If we're going to attempt to steal Rina back from the Grass, we need to send a small, superior strike team, composed entirely of Jounin."

But Naruto just crossed his arms, giving Yukio and Itachi an appraising look. "Gather your teams, Yukio. And then take a message from me to the rest of the Genin. Tell them what I told Ibiki, that the Grass have left Konoha, that there is a mission pending, and that they need to find their teachers and wait for instructions."

"All the Genin," Yukio said, not in surprise, but requesting confirmation that he heard orders correctly.

"All of them. I know you know where to find them. Itachi, you go with him. If you are really sure that sacrificing your eye is worth your being on the mission-"

"I'm sure," Itachi said, wondering what Naruto wanted *all* of the Genin to do.

"Then I should just remove the eye now!" Sakura said, clearly exasperated.

"No," Naruto said. "Itachi may still be able to make use of the Sharingan, even if doing so burns it out. Sasuke would say the same. It might make a difference."

Itachi nodded jerkily and made his way slowly toward the door.

As he passed, the Hokage formed hand signs, his fingers flickering between the gestures. "Sakura, stay with Lucia. Keep her calm until Shikamaru gets here. I'll be back."

"Back?" Sakura demanded. She actually stamped her foot in frustration, fists clenched at her sides. "Where are *you* going?"

"To stop Sasuke," he said.

Itachi paused at the doorway, confused. "Didn't Sasuke go to look for Rina?"

"No," Naruto said, his expression dark. "Sasuke's headed for the Village Hidden in the Grass."

Before Itachi had time to reason it out, the Hokage completed a string of hand signs. Unlike Ino and the other Shinobi, Naruto *actually* vanished from the room, his departure marked only by a flash of light. One moment he was there. And then he was gone.

"Wow," Yukio breathed beside him in rapt reverence. "I can't believe I just got to see that in person."

Itachi had no idea what the Hokage's jutsu was, and he had no thoughts to spare thinking about it. With the Hokage gone, all he could see was his mother.

"Mom," he said. She looked like a ceramic statue that had shattered into fragments and been pieced back together with glue. "I'll bring Rina back," he said, forcing strength and certainty into his voice, as if

acting with his mother's confidence would somehow fix her. "I will. I promise."

His mother didn't answer, but she didn't need to. Her eyes locked on him and they said everything.

I can't mess this up.

"Come on," Yukio said, and Itachi found himself following.

The hallway leading away from the surgery wing was cold and empty of people, but a short walk brought them to a desk where a young Chuunin recognized Itachi. She looked startled to see him walking around, but didn't object when he asked her about his things. She gave him a bundle from behind the desk-his cleats and jacket, his kunai and shuriken, and his arm guard, all of it cleaned and sterilized from the arena. He bent to slip on his cleats and when he looked up, Yukio was looking at him in a peculiar way.

"We should get you a cool eye patch," Yukio said as Itachi straightened. "Maybe paint a Sharingan on the outside of it."

Itachi didn't say anything. He wasn't sure how to respond. He wasn't sure how he felt about walking with Yukio down a corridor or anything else that had happened in the last ten minutes.

Yukio led the way to Amaya's room. Haro was there, sitting in a chair by Amaya's bed, flipping a kunai into the air and catching it by the handle. He seemed a bundle of raw, nervous energy, his free fingers drumming against his knee. When Itachi and Yukio appeared together in the doorway, he did a doubled take and fell off the chair. The kunai clattered to the ground.

Amaya's eyes merely widened. "Itachi," she breathed. " *Yukio?* Wha—" Itachi did not think Amaya could have sounded any more incredulous. Itachi might have felt the same way, but he wasn't thinking about Yukio.

"Rina's been kidnapped," Itachi explained. "By the Grass."

Haro scrambled to his feet. "Your sister? No way."

"The Hokage's organizing a mission," Yukio said. "I assume you guys are coming."

Haro scowled at Yukio, but Amaya just nodded. "Of course we are." She flung the covers back and swung her legs out of the bed. "I'm sorry about your eye, Itachi," she said as she stood. "Haro told me."

"I might have to have it removed," Itachi said. "So the other one doesn't fail. After the mission."

"That's rough," she said with a sympathetic nod. "A Sharingan is really something. I'm sorry."

And that was all anyone said about it, other than Yukio's comment about the cool eye patch. For a moment, Itachi felt strange, as if a part of himself had detached and floated up to the ceiling, watching the four of them from a short distance away.

This is just life as a Shinobi , he realized. He remembered Haro's apology in the hospital room. *He was upset because he felt he should have protected me* , Itachi thought. *That he failed me as a teammate. It wasn't really about my eye. That's just a tool. It's about each other. They all understand that there are risks associated with this life. People here lose eyes all the time, I bet. Worse. They lose people. But the risks are worth taking, because they* save *people too.*

Rina.

His throat tightened.

No wonder he had had such trouble fitting in. Yukio had been right to call him a civilian. He really hadn't understood. If he lost Rina…

But I can't lose her. I have to get her back.

Yukio led his team to where Michiko and Jumei were holed up together in another of the hospital rooms. Itachi remained silent as they came to the door, wondering how Yukio's team would react to the news, if they would bristle at the thought of working with him, the way Haro had scowled at Yukio.

But Yukio just popped halfway through the doorframe and slapped the inside the wall with the flat of his hand. Michiko and Jumei looked up like two startled cats. They registered the presence of Itachi and his team with surprise. Michiko opened her mouth, but Yukio spoke first.

"Gear up," Yukio told them. "We're going on a joint mission with Team Four. We're getting Itachi's sister back from the Grass."

Neither Michiko nor Jumei made any objections. Neither asked any questions. They just got their things and joined Yukio at the door.

Sasuke was alone. Alone in the woods. Trees surrounded him on all sides, tall and silent and shrouded in darkness, only half visible against the black, like specters of the night. The air was biting cold, but he didn't feel it. He moved swiftly and soundlessly between them, his Sharingan eyes cutting the shadows like a curtain, focused on the horizon.

I should have seen it sooner, he thought. It was all he could think. *Even without these eyes, I should have seen* her *. It is so obvious.*

Rina. That little girl, nine years old, not a perfect replica of his brother by any means, not physically, not like the boy, but the similarities were striking enough, and everything else about her—

I can't believe I didn't see it.

She was so quiet, deep in her own thoughts, so easy to dismiss, but always watching. And thinking. *Spying* . He had noted it. He had

even noted how it made him nervous, that keen sense of observation she had, and the silence with which she bore all she observed, interrupted only occasionally by the succinct, and astute, comments she made. He just didn't connect *why* it made him nervous.

She's like him.

That she should learn Genjutsu, to understand it instinctively, without instruction, well enough to create an illusion and evade a Genin a good as Yukio only confirmed what should have been obvious. And then to demonstrate Chidori, just by *watching* …

She is the genius , he thought. *Her brother has talent, but he has to work harder to grasp it. She is the true genius.*

Rina was Itachi's daughter.

Why didn't I see *it?*

And now the Grass had her. Did they even know what they had? To think that they might torture and kill her…

He could not move fast enough. If the Grass so much as *scratched* her—

I will kill them all.

"SASUKE!"

Naruto. He recognized the chakra in the same instant he heard the voice, but it came out of nowhere. He felt it behind him, first as a fiery blaze of energy, and then as a material body, flying at Sasuke from behind, right on his heels, where Sasuke had been just seconds before.

He's marked me with a seal, Sasuke realized. *He's teleported here, using the Fourth Hokage's jutsu.*

His reaction was instantaneous. He evaded Naruto's headlong attack, shifting to the side, his katana sliding out of the sheath against his back in the same moment that he pivoted. He caught Naruto's blazing fist with his free hand and brought the point of the sword to his friend's neck. The sword itself was barely a threat to Naruto, and they both knew it, but it gave him a moment to look Konoha's Hokage, his friend, in the eye.

"Don't try to stop me, Naruto," he said coldly. "I will fight you over this, and I will fight you seriously, not like in the arena. We can level this whole forest. I don't care. It will be nothing to what I will do to the Grass."

Naruto's eyes blazed a deep, burning blue, staring straight into his Sharingan. "I *will* stop you, Sasuke," he said. "If I have to, but not for the reason you think. I am not here to stop your retaliation on the Grass."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

Sasuke had been certain that Naruto would see war arising from this and do anything to stop it, that he would try to lock Sasuke down, in irons if necessary, sue for peace with the Grass, and try to work things out. Meanwhile, the Grass might kill Rina, or maim her, as Lucia feared, or anything else they liked. Sasuke wouldn't risk that. If they harmed the girl, Naruto could consider the threat of war nullified… since there would *be* no Village Hidden in the Grass by the time Sasuke was done with them.

The wind stirred, lifting leaves from the ground to float passed them, the same size and shape of leaf that was engraved on Sasuke's forehead protector.

"If I strike the Grass," Sasuke explained slowly. "It is the move of a single Shinobi gone rogue. If you strike the Grass, it will be war. You are Hokage."

"That's right," Naruto said. "I am Hokage. You keep forgetting. You think I am going to allow the Grass to steal one of my own, to put an Academy girl under the knife, someone I promised that I would protect? You should know better, Sasuke."

"You aren't seeing this properly, Naruto. I know you won't allow that to happen, but I am trying to help the village out of a sticky situation. If I do this on my own, Konoha will be blameless, and Rina will still be saved."

"And I am trying to help *you* ," Naruto answered. "You don't have to do this alone. I am behind you. All of Konoha will be behind you. *We* will save Rina. All of us. Together. And then I won't have to hunt down my best friend for sedition and murder."

"You will order Konoha to strike the Grass?"

The trees around them looked on in silence.

"Yes," Naruto said.

Sasuke was silent, evaluating Naruto's expression. Naruto's face was sober, but his eyes were bright, blue like the ocean under sunlight. "I don't want there to be loss of life," Naruto said slowly, "on either side, but I have a plan."

Sasuke dug his cleats into the earth, ready to spring in an instant, and pressed the point of the katana closer to Naruto's neck. "That is what I am worried about! It is impossible to do this cleanly, Naruto! There will be loss of life, more on their side than ours probably, but loss of life all the same. For me, it's worth it. If you feel differently, let's just fight, you and me right now, for real, and after I win, I will save the girl, deliver her safely to you, and disappear. That way, you don't—"

"You're not hearing me," Naruto said. "As much as I *actually* want to fight you, Sasuke, just for fun, now is not the time. We will do that later, when your niece and nephew are safe and can cheer for you

as you *try* and defeat me. Understand what I am telling you: I am *not* losing you and I am *not* going to let harm come to Rina. But I will not suffer the Grass to be demolished either."

Sasuke wanted to knock that stubborn, optimistic look right off of Naruto's face. "You always think you can do the impossible, that you can save *everyone* ! You are going to lose the element of surprise trying to figure out how to do it! The Grass won't know what to do when they see *me* coming. They will be anticipating a response from you. No matter how good your plan is, it won't be as fast as sending me right now. Naruto—"

"Have some faith, Sasuke. I am imploring you, as a friend, for once in your life, to *trust* me. Konoha is behind you. I am behind you. You aren't going to lose anyone. Not this time. I *promise* you, out of my love for you, that I will protect your family. We are in this together."

Sasuke started to shake. It was so frustrating. Naruto was SO frustrating. To hear him say that, *like* that… It was disarming. Wholly and utterly disarming. *You always do this. Stop stealing my rage. It is the fuel I need to rely on myself alone!* "How long must I wait?"

"I want to move on the Grass tonight, just as you do, but I shouldn't have to tell you that it is really important that we don't mess this up. If they *do* see us coming, those responsible might kill Rina and run. I need to make sure that doesn't happen. We can't assume that all of the Grass is even aware of what is going on."

Sasuke's mind began to race. His heart was hammering in his chest, beating hard to hold back the terror closing in around him. He couldn't lose that girl. At this stage in his life, with the strength he had now, if another family member was cut down, a completely innocent girl… No. He wouldn't lose her. If he delayed, he might be too late, but Naruto had a point. If he rushed in and they saw *Sasuke Uchiha* coming, in wrath and vengeance, Rina's captors might kill her out of panic and flee. He had a reputation for being…unreasonable…when roused. It would be better to have some kind of diversion, and for that he needed other Shinobi.

He breathed deeply, trying to calm himself, trying to think through what Naruto was saying. After a few minutes of silence in which Naruto's expression remained resolutely and unabashedly loyal, he lowered his katana.

"All right," Sasuke said, sheathing the blade. "I will come back with you to Konoha."

"I *love* hearing you say that," Naruto answered.

Sakura could barely keep still. She kept fidgeting, putting her hair up and taking it back down, picking things up and putting them back, sitting, standing, pacing. Waiting.

Lucia had collapsed as soon as the room had emptied. Naruto vanished and Itachi left with Yukio and it was like whatever wires had been holding the woman up suddenly snapped. Her knees had buckled and she had slumped against the white walls of the hospital room, sobbing.

Sakura crouched beside her on the tiles and checked the woman's vitals. They were strong, but her heart was racing. She complained of lightheadedness and her voice cracked when she talked, her lips dry. Her muscles were also stiff and she trembled without being cold. Sakura suspected adrenaline withdrawal. She had probably been running on epinephrine since the match. First there was Itachi's injury, then the news about Itachi, then the results of the surgery, and now Rina.

She tried to talk Lucia into the bed Itachi had vacated, but the woman refused to lie down and would not take any medicine for fear that it would make her drowsy and she would miss some shred of news about her daughter. She agreed to sit in a chair by the window and had been there ever since, ghostly white and eerily still, a glass of water on the sill beside her, staring out at the village roads.

We will find Rina, Sakura wanted to say to her. *Everything will be fine.*

But in good conscience, she couldn't say that. She wasn't sure that *anything* would be fine. Itachi was almost sure to lose his eye. His reaction was stuck in her mind. When she told him, all the emotion in his right eye was vacant in the left. Although the left followed the right, where the right was a window to the boy's heart, the left was like an empty pane of dark glass. But it was better than no eye at all.

And now Rina…. There was no getting Rina back instantly, and getting her back at all was going to be tricky. Lucia surely knew it.

Sasuke , she thought fervently, biting her lip at the thought.

If Lucia's reaction was to fall, Sasuke's had been to fight. Sakura knew he had gone after the Grass, just as Naruto had said. She couldn't imagine what Sasuke was feeling. He had spent so much energy *not caring* about those kids, until just today. Since the Sharingan emerged, she had seen him open up, to crack the door, and then *this* . He couldn't be clear-headed. She feared what decisions he would make if something did happen to Rina.

And what about me? she thought. *What about his own child? If he attacks the Grass in a rage, I will lose him,* she thought, and then berated herself for thinking that. *I have already lost him.*

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

Lucia's head turned at the sound, hope lighting like a candle in her eyes, but Sakura shook her head at her. It was too soon for Ino, Neji, and Lee to have any news on the perimeter, and Naruto had just left.

The knock came again, more insistently.

"Hang on," Sakura said. "I'm coming."

"It's Hinata," The voice from behind the door was softly spoken, but urgent. "I know that Naruto is not there. I can't see his chakra. Where did he go? Rina is not in the village, but I found-"

Sakura crossed the room to open the door. Hinata's eyes greeted her, the color of milk and lavender, fretful with worry. But that wasn't what made Sakura pull up short and gasp. Hinata wasn't alone. A Shinobi stood behind her. Hinata hadn't found Rina, but she had found…

"Kakashi," Sakura gasped, flinging the door open wide. "When did you get back?"

"Just a little bit ago," Kakashi said. He smiled the way he always did, through his mask so that all she could see were the muscles crinkling in his face and light in his eyes. "It seems I just missed the match of the year. Why are you crying?"

Sakura hadn't realized she was, but she felt the salty sting of tears in her eyes when Kakashi mentioned them. So much had happened. So much the last few days, the last few *hours* . Sasuke, Itachi's eye, Rina's kidnapping. It was like everything and everyone around her was breaking apart. Seeing her teacher standing there, so solid and reliable and…and *funny* . It overwhelmed her.

"I heard some rumors in the market," Kakashi continued. "You and Sasuke?"

"Over," Sakura said quickly, wiping the tears from her eyes. "And I'm pregnant. But that isn't the biggest news. We have been dying for word from you. I-"

"Ah, I thought I saw a glow," Kakashi interrupted. "You and Sasuke will have one beautiful baby, Sakura."

For a moment, Sakura was silent. Then her insides started quaking. She felt flummoxed, embarrassed, and…and relieved. Of all the reactions she had feared from her former sensei, a compliment had

never crossed her mind. On impulse, she threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Kakashi," she whispered. "I am glad you are here." He caught her with one arm, patting her back awkwardly on the back.

Flushing, Sakura pulled out of the hug and stepped back to let him in the room.

Lucia was watching them from the window.

"I met your sister," Kakashi said to her, his visible eye smiling. "Nice lady. Enormous house. Delicious biscuits."

Something flickered across Lucia's eyes. "Is she well?"

"They haven't harmed her," Kakashi said. "A great many of them want *you* dead, though."

"They?" Sakura asked, startled by the turn in the conversation. Kakashi wasn't beating around the bush. And he seemed to know exactly what to say to Lucia. "Who?" Sakura asked.

"The Higher Houses," Kakashi said.

Sakura frowned. Lucia had mentioned that earlier when she was screaming about Rina and proclaiming that Gehard was not in charge of things. "What are the Higher Houses?"

"Lucia's neighbors and…friends…for lack of a better term," Kakashi said. "I hope you can forgive me for being late, Sakura. The more I started to uncover, the more there was to find. I sent messages, but I perceive that you did not get them."

"No," Sakura said. "No messages arrived."

Kakashi nodded. "Lucia, I took the liberty of encouraging your sister to flee the country. From what I learned after speaking with her, it is not safe for her there anymore, or anyone who might be seen as leverage to use against you."

"Where is Cece?"

"Safe. She is on her way here with her husband and servants. Some of your former servants as well. They are traveling under false names. I escorted them myself, most of the way, but thought I had best hurry ahead when we started hearing some troubling rumors about the Grass. I found others to guard them once we reached the Land of Fire."

"Thank you," Lucia whispered quietly. "I've never met you. Thank you."

"The safety of your relations seemed important, given what I could uncover about your situation."

"The Grass has taken my daughter," Lucia informed him.

"Then I am too late."

By the time Naruto returned to Konoha with Sasuke, the village was buzzing like a beehive that had been kicked by a boot.

Shinobi were out of their houses and mingling in the cobblestone streets, whispering together. Many of those he saw were armed, as if the village might be attacked any moment. They saw him pass and pointed. He waved confidently and kept moving. The expression on Sasuke's face didn't do anything to soften the mood. Sasuke looked like he meant to deal in death, and Naruto knew him well enough to know that that wasn't too far off from his real feelings.

"Kakashi's back," Sasuke said suddenly as they approached the hospital.

Naruto turned. "Where?"

Sasuke pointed. It wasn't Kakashi, but one of his dogs lounging by the steps.

"Finally," Naruto breathed.

Naruto vaulted up the steps to and pulled open the doors. He was accosted by Shikamaru before he got ten paces into the lobby.

"First you leave me with two furious feudal lords!" Shikamaru scowled. His hands were shoved in his pockets, his hair pulled tight above his head in a topknot. "And then when you send for me, you're not even where you said you would be!"

"Hey, Shikamaru," Naruto greeted him. "Sorry. Are the feudal lords still mad?"

"More like desperately anxious. When you didn't accept their request for an audience and they learned that you were holed up with *her* instead, they started to talk. I've been listening to them tell us everything we wanted to know about Lucia for the past two hours."

That brought Naruto up short. Even Sasuke looked startled. "Everything?"

"Enough to guess the rest," Shikamaru said. "We've sent our spies to all the wrong places. Lucia isn't doing anything illegal in the Land of Fire. That's why our normal haunts didn't yield anything."

"She told us she was really rich," Naruto said. "More than we guessed. Is that all it is?"

"She didn't lie to you. What else has happened? Everyone keeps asking me if we are going to war with the Grass. You would think that I would know!"

"The Grass has kidnapped Rina," Sasuke answered in a cold voice —deadly cold. "We go to war, or I do. I don't care about Lucia's secret. I care less about her money."

Shikamaru let out a string of curses. Sasuke ignored him, shouldering past and heading toward the room where they had left

Lucia.

Naruto shared a glance with Shikamaru and sprinted ahead.

Shikamaru caught them both and intercepted Sasuke in the waiting room for the surgery ward, putting a hand on the door to prevent Sasuke from barging in.

"Listen, Sasuke, Naruto," he said in a controlled tone, his dark eyes regarding each of them levelly. "Lucia was right to disguise her wealth. The truth of it can't leave this room, especially with this mission pending on her daughter."

"It's just money," Naruto said, crossing his arms.

"It's just money to *you* ," Shikamaru said. "But you are unusual, Naruto, even for a Shinobi. *This* much money is a big deal. Even to Shinobi."

"How much are we talking about?" Sasuke asked.

"Enough to intimidate the feudal lords. 'Really rich' doesn't begin to describe it. Actually, since she owns quite a lot of land, you might as well think of Lucia as a feudal lord herself, though her country's system doesn't work like ours. She trades through a licensed entity she calls White Rain. It's on our own books actually. We buy steel from companies she owns. She covers her association well, but if you bother to dig into it, her assets are…extensive."

Naruto paused, trying to sort that out. "I don't understand. She owns steel?"

"She owns everything. Mountains, forests, fields. Banks. Businesses. The feudal lords gave me the background of it. Her father lent them money, right around when the third ninja war broke out, when everybody was hurting for quick resources. In swooped this foreign investor, an individual with more personal wealth than the feudal lords at the time had ever seen or heard of. He loaned them

silver mined from mountains in the west, and they used it to finance our wars. Since Lucia took over her father's contracts, she's been expanding. First it was a loan here or there. Then there were business deals where she would agree to buy up the debt of say, a struggling masonry business, in exchange for some percent of the revenue. And so on. She deals with everybody. The Akatsuki even borrowed from her, though she lost on that one obviously. Her lending rates are high enough to compensate for the risk. Things are peaceful now, but not as prosperous as the feudal lords hoped. They are underwater on their loans."

"What does that mean?" Naruto asked. "Underwater?"

"It means that they have borrowed more than their assets are worth. They can't pay her back."

"So what does she want?"

"You want my guess? I think it's a stake in Konoha."

Naruto fell silent. For a moment, no one said anything. Naruto's thoughts came to him in a quick cascade of feelings and images. He maneuvered past Shikamaru and pushed open the door.

Lucia was right where they had left her, but she was not the same woman from before the match. She was like a ghost of herself, her eyes red from weeping. Sakura was in the room with her, and so was Kakashi, leaning against the wall, thumbing through the pages of a well worn comic—a welcome sight, if Naruto wasn't so distracted. Sakura looked up with Naruto entered, Sasuke and Shikamaru on his heels.

"Sasuke," she breathed. "Thank goodness."

Sasuke had the presence to look somewhat abashed.

He didn't think what it would do to Sakura if he went rogue , Naruto thought. *He didn't consider his own child as hard as he is worrying*

about Itachi's. Or maybe he had, and thought both Sakura and the baby would be better for it. The thought annoyed him, but it was Lucia that concerned him most in the moment.

"Lucia," Naruto announced. "Konoha is not for sale."

She looked up. Her expression barely registered surprise. "Who told you I want to buy it?"

"Shikamaru has been talking with the feudal lords," he said. "If they told you they can sell Konoha to you, they are mistaken."

Lucia just tilted her head. "Konoha is a tool in the eyes of your feudal lords. They fear Shinobi certainly, but they also think they can control you. Why is that? Because they know you will not attack them. Doing so would only bring chaos. Instead they pay you to be what they need you to be. If they abandoned the village, each clan would be out for itself, as it was in the old way, conquering and despoiling each other to carve a place in the world. It is a governing body that gives you the reason and the resources to unite. It keeps things-"

"Peaceful," Naruto finished. "That's why the villages were originally founded. But I don't care what the feudal lords say. Konoha isn't owned by them. We are independent. The village is not for sale."

"Everything is for sale" Lucia answered. "Even my daughter." She turned her head to the window. "How much do you think will they ask to return her to me alive?"

Naruto stared at her. It took him a moment to understand that she was reacting to the situation and not expressing her own feelings. Naruto didn't like it.

"Rina is a *person* ," he said adamantly. "And we are going to get her back."

"And how much will *you* charge to do that?"

"Is that who you think I am?"

"I don't know," she said. She squeezed her eyes shut. Tears leaked out of them. "Yesterday, no. But now that Rina… I don't know. I don't know. Konoha is not for sale, you say, and yet I *would* have bought the debt. Rina is my daughter. What will I pay to have her safely home? Hokage, I am at your mercy. Tell me, please. What is Rina's life worth?"

No one said anything. Sakura was staring at Lucia as if she were some kind of alien creature. Even Kakashi looked up from the pages of his book.

Naruto turned to Shikamaru. "What does she mean she would have 'bought the debt'?"

Shikamaru was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over a mesh shirt, dark eyes calculating. "We owe money to the feudal lords. The feudal lords owe money to Lucia, money that they can't pay back. She is suggesting that the feudal lords could pass some of Konoha's debt to her, which would ease their burdens, get us the money we need, and give Lucia a stake in the village, all at the same time."

"Oh," Naruto said, trying to work that out. "And if I object?"

"They don't have to ask you," Shikamaru told him. "It is their debt. If a deal had gone through, you might not even have been informed. What do you care what bank they use to finance our needs? It would have been some piece of paper I *know* you wouldn't even have looked at. However, it is a moot point. The feudal lords don't want an outsider to have any stake in Konoha. They told me so themselves."

"You are right," Lucia said. "The Daimyo has entertained the idea to keep me close, and my purse open, but never had any intention of following through on it. As an outsider, it is impossible."

"For you," Shikamaru pointed out. "But your heir is one of us."

Sakura gasped.

Lucia nodded.

Understanding came slower for Naruto. Did *Itachi* know this, her son? Did he know his mother wanted him to have part of the Land of Fire…part of Konoha? His thoughts were spinning.

Shikamaru crossed his arms. "The feudal lords understandably hate the idea of Itachi Van Alstyne learning Shinobi arts. They fear that the village would support a *Shinobi* feudal lord, and that they would be pressured to trade away their control of the village, especially if they cannot find a way to alleviate their burdens."

"That's why you wanted a Shinobi child?" Sakura said. "So you could get a piece of Konoha?"

"No pieces of Konoha are for sale," Naruto said. "Not even to Shinobi feudal lords, or whatever your son is."

Lucia only shrugged. "Itachi will inherit a great deal of assets in this country regardless. I brought him here because he should understand this country, love this country, and that includes Shinobi, if he is to be responsible for supporting so much of it." She looked at Sasuke. "Is this what your brother would have wanted?"

Out of any of them, Sasuke looked the most unfazed, like he really didn't care. "If you are so rich, then your children can do whatever they want with their lives. They would be protected and provided for and would potentially have the power to influence Konoha, to support it or ignore it or impede it, whatever was warranted. Yes, I think Itachi would have accepted that."

"Itachi would have accepted Lucia interfering with Konoha?" Sakura said. "After all he sacrificed for the village?"

"Consider if Danzo was Hokage," Sasuke said to her.

Sakura looked surprised. "I didn't think of that."

Things were rather different when Itachi Uchiha knew Lucia, Naruto mused. And Lucia was clever at her work. She might have been a help to Konoha, without anyone even realizing it. *But why would Itachi trust her? She has a strong will and a wealth of resources, but what is her vision?*

Naruto frowned. "Lucia, you could do whatever you want. Why do you care about amassing so much? What use to you is Konoha? I don't believe it is greed."

"Why not?" she said. She sounded so tired. "Everyone else does."

"That's everyone else. I've been trying so hard to understand you. All I can think now is this village must seem pretty backward to what you are used to, yet you seem to want for nothing and I've never once heard you complain or belittle our way of life. All I've seen you indulge in is tea and a few nice dresses. I think you like it here. I think you like things simple. So why do you need all this money? What do you want to *do* with it?"

"The Higher Houses," Sakura said. "It has something to do with that."

Kakashi was nodding as he turned a page in his book.

"What are the Higher Houses?" Naruto asked Lucia.

Lucia did not hesitate, almost as if she were responding to an interrogation.

She thinks I have her on a wire, Naruto thought. *She still doesn't understand me.*

"The Higher Houses are a group of prominent families," Lucia said. "Combined, they control the majority of my home country's total wealth. The government—our equivalent of feudal lords—is made up

of elected officials, but the Higher Houses have corrupted it to impotency. They buy influence anywhere, in anything."

"And your family is a Higher House?" Sakura suggested.

"Yes, though not the highest. Still, over the past few decades, the Van Alstyne family has risen in wealth and prominence. My father started it. He was what we call a rainmaker. Business came to him like breathing. Everything he touched turned to gold. He might have become like the others, but when my father was still young, he met my mother, and she changed him."

"Who was your mother?" Sakura asked.

"No one of importance. A kind girl from a modest family. My father met her when he was out hunting in the woods. After they wed, he began to look at the Higher Houses more critically, and came to believe that they were, at best, vapid and selfish, and at worst, greedy and cruel. He began to pry into their affairs. He found things that he rather wished he hadn't."

"What?" Naruto asked. "Secrets?"

"Yes," Lucia said. "Many. Some of an abominable nature."

"Like what?" Naruto ventured to ask.

"The list is too long. Most of it is corruption of government and avoidance of law in one way or another, but there are darker secrets. You don't know what they are like, these people. When you have as much as they do, when you think you can do anything…" Her eyes filled with tears. "I *know* what they will do to Rina, because they have done it before, to others, and with less reason."

"It won't happen," Naruto reiterated. "What did your father do?"

Lucia closed her eyes. "My father wanted to extricate our house from the Higher Houses. Start life afresh somewhere new. At the time, this

part of the world was rife with war, but my father saw it as an opportunity. He liquidated his assets, bought silver, and loaned it to lords and merchants and revolutionaries, whoever needed it most desperately, without telling the other Houses where he had invested it, or how much." She paused. "They didn't like that."

"Why not?" Sakura asked. "It's his money. Why can't do with it as he pleases and live where he wants?"

"The Higher Houses are tangled together, much the same way provinces are part of nations. Separation is not possible, not without a fight. My father was already unpopular. He was becoming more vocal in his opinions and the Higher Houses began to suspect him of wanting to defect. When they learned that he had invested his fortune to the east, they killed him for it."

"What about your mother?" Naruto asked.

"She died soon after. It was ruled a suicide, but-" She stopped, choking on her words.

"It was a murder," Kakashi said, lowering his book. "Very obviously so. Even though, unlike your father, she had done absolutely nothing."

Lucia was silent. It was as if her jaw had locked. She just shook her head, her hands trembling.

Kakashi closed the book and stepped away from the wall. "Lucia's mother was tortured to death," he said. "She was questioned about what Lucia's father had done with the money, and what his plans were."

"She didn't know," Lucia gasped out.

"No. And neither did your sister Cecile. But *you* knew, didn't you, Lucia?"

There was a moment of silence.

"I knew," Lucia admitted. "When I was thirteen, my father pulled me aside and swore me to secrecy. He told me that he had *spent* my inheritance—invested it. He told me where, and why, and what he wanted me to do if something should happen to him. Two years later he was dead. My mother was terrified. She didn't understand and didn't want to hear it. She told me I must marry, and marry immediately. She wanted to show the Higher Houses that we were not trying to escape, that we were building our lives among them as we always have. I knew that with my father dead and my sister unable to have children, the only way I could be sure of securing legal right to the family fortune was to produce an heir. So at sixteen, I married Gehard. The Higher Houses had him well in hand. He was my keeper and their spy. I lived with him, did whatever he wanted as his wife, and learned to be silent about my feelings and activities."

So that explained Lucia's silence. *She doesn't trust anyone,* Naruto thought. *She can't get close to anyone. She lives among sharks and bullies and betrayers. She has lived in fear her whole life.*

"What did they *do* to your mother?" Naruto asked.

But Lucia wouldn't answer him. She was still trembling.

"They came in the night," Kakashi said. "They bound her to a desk in the library and smashed her fingers and toes. Then they made her drink a toxic household cleaning agent. They poisoned her by spoonfuls, between questions. The girls were on the other side of the door."

Sakura put her hands to her mouth.

Lucia's voice broke. "I heard everything. She told them she didn't know anything. She told them she was sorry. She begged for forgiveness. She cried for them to stop. But they made her drink each time, until she could do nothing but scream. She didn't know what they wanted to know." Lucia's hands trembled on her lap. She

didn't look at anyone. "But I did," she whispered. "I knew the answers, but I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything. And they killed her."

Naruto tried to imagine it, what that would have been like for a young girl. He couldn't. If it had been him he would have barged into the room, broke down the door, saved his mother. But Lucia was not Naruto. She was just a girl burdened with a secret that killed both her parents. From the sound of it, confessing the secret would not have saved anyone. She would only have thrown away her father's dream, and her only chance to escape. "It's not your fault," he said to her. "Those are terrible people."

"They were hired men," Lucia said, recovering herself. "Not Shinobi, but like Shinobi. The Higher Houses paid them to question my mother. They knew my mother didn't know anything."

"Then why did they do that to her?" Sakura asked, aghast.

"Because they knew I was listening," Lucia answered. "Why else would they have done it when I was home? They killed my mother to send me a message." Her eyes became dark and hard, like polished glass. Her voice shook with raw emotion. "There is no escape, not for me, not for my family. I heard them loud and clear."

Naruto had a sudden epiphany. "And you came here." He was awed by the enormity of it, the courage it must have taken. "You traveled across worlds. You had to secure your father's business anyway, but while you were here, you found the most dangerous man you could find—a rogue Shinobi, a murderer without attachments, in a land where you had power, where you meant to make your home. You had his child and then you asked him to hurt you."

Sasuke eyed Naruto askance.

Lucia looked startled. "What are you saying?"

"You were alone and afraid. There was no one you could trust. You couldn't even trust your sister because you didn't want to endanger her. Lucia, you may be a masochist, but when you asked Itachi Uchiha to torture you, to *truly* torture you, you did it with a purpose. Don't you see? Itachi trained you to withstand torture so you wouldn't be *afraid* . So you could face the Higher Houses."

"That's—" But Lucia stopped herself, eyes widening.

"I think I know the kind of woman you are now," Naruto said. "It is not a cold person. It is a strong person. You are a tank. A fortress."

"I'm not—"

"If were you were taken now as your mother was taken, if these Higher Houses had you beat within an inch of your life, forced to drink poison, whatever they could think up, would you have given them a damn thing?"

Lucia's face was like stone, impervious and impenetrable, just the way he liked to see it, now that he understood her. "No."

He pressed her further. "Because you are shoring up for a fight. You aren't trying to escape. If you were, you would have just run. That was your father's dream. He meant to make a modest fortune and just live here, away from them. But you…you mean to wage war."

"I mean to destroy the Higher Houses," Lucia said. "And I will do and become whatever I must. Not all of it is pretty or nice. I don't think I have to tell you that I am not well loved."

"Do they suspect?" Naruto asked.

"They must by now. But before I left, they thought they had me in hand. They had Gehard to spy on me, and I was, after all, just a woman, and not terribly popular. The Higher Houses never saw me as a true threat because I never had quite enough. What they didn't

realize is that my activities in my homeland were a feint. The wealth I have there is nothing to what I have built here."

"Why not just hire Shinobi assassins to destroy these people?" Naruto asked, not because he thought she should, but because he wanted to understand her reasoning. "You could afford it."

Lucia shook her head, dark curls swaying against her cheeks. "The money I inherited, that my father invested here—was built on death and blood. I do not mean to keep it that way. Besides which, I cannot be certain of Shinobi. Anyone who works for money can be bought for more money. The Higher Houses might simply offer more than I was paying and turn my army against me."

"No self-respecting Shinobi would be turned that way," Naruto said. But Shikamaru made a sound in his throat. Naruto turned to him, surprised. "You think differently?"

"I think you should be cautious making generalizations like that," Shikamaru said. "I would like to think that all Shinobi are honorable, but there are always exceptions. Lucia isn't particularly trusted here, if you remember. If these Higher Houses approached the right Shinobi and presented an offer in the right way, we could see mutiny. We are talking about a lot of money, Naruto. We have seen Shinobi turn on each other for pettier reasons. Shinobi are human, and our lives are hard. What Lucia is suggesting would tempt some."

"None of my people," Naruto repeated stubbornly.

"Not if you were leading them. But you are an unusual Hokage and we are not talking specifically about Konoha, just Shinobi in general. Look at what has happened with the Grass. They have kidnapped a little girl because someone has paid them to do it. They know we will come down on them, but it is a mission. There are plenty of Shinobi who do not question missions. You know that as well as I do. We do not even know what they have been told."

Naruto frowned, thinking about that. He supposed Shikamaru had a point. Misinformation *was* a problem. Sometimes intelligence was bad, and it didn't seem like these Higher Houses would be averse to lying. The right lie, told in the right way… To make Lucia seem like the real threat wouldn't even take much of a lie. And he *had* seen Shinobi treat others badly, including members of their own village. His childhood had been evidence enough of that. To say nothing of Sasuke's experience.

Sasuke hadn't said much during Lucia's confession. He was caressing the handle of his katana, looking out the window to the north. Naruto could feel his impatience.

"Lucia," Naruto said. "You have no choice but to do whatever I demand. Isn't that right?"

Sakura's eyes widened. "Naruto," she breathed.

Lucia merely looked resigned. "What do you want?" she asked.

Naruto crossed his arms. "Nothing. As I told Sasuke, I'm getting Rina back. I'm getting her back because she is Leaf. As for your money, I don't want it. I wouldn't take it even without this situation."

"Are you mad?" Lucia breathed. "Or stupid? Do you not understand? I know your village is struggling. I can save it. I will give you anything."

"I am Hokage," Naruto answered. " *I* will save the village. I don't need to extort money from my guests to do it."

Lucia's eyes widened. Then they filled with incredulous tears.

"Business is not my strongest skill," Naruto admitted to her. "Maybe that's true for most Shinobi, I don't know. It could be why we have so many problems, but money just isn't that important to me. Do you know what is? Protecting people. I will save Rina because she needs saving."

Lucia looked, frankly, as if she didn't believe him, or was afraid to, but he also saw hope in her eyes. His resolve only tightened. She may not understand, but she *would* believe.

"So, Naruto," Shikamaru said, clearing his throat. " *How* are you thinking of doing this?"

Naruto turned to his advisor, and included Sakura and Sasuke and Kakashi too. "I have a plan, but I'll need your help to work out the details," he answered. "One thing I can tell you: These Higher Houses have awakened the Will of Fire. Maybe they are used to getting their way, but not this time, not against me. No one takes my people. This won't be quietly answered. Konoha is going to come down on the Grass for this…in *force* ."

"Konoha?" Shikamaru asked, bewildered. "Wait. *All* of Konoha?"

He nodded grimly. "Like an avalanche."

TBC

Anxious for reviews! I feel like there is "so much" in this chapter… written over such a long period… and I may have under-developed it… or over-worked it. There are four scenes:

Itachi's POV

Sasuke's POV

Sakura POV

Naruto's POV

There was a SasuSaku scene that I wrote to come after this last scene…but it doesn't fit. It will be in the next chapter. Feel free to tell me how you think that should go, given the conflicts and changes in this chapter.

Would appreciate comments on any of the following (whatever you feel like commenting on…a lot happened…)

Sasuke's acceptance of Itachi/Rina

Rina's kidnapping

Itachi's resolution (and Yukio's help)

Kakashi's return

Lucia's secret

Naruto's response

Please review! It means a lot and will get me working on the next chapter. Thanks :)

Chapter 21

NOTE: i dont have internet so trying to do this on my phone. Please note thar the Grass teleported out of the Leaf.

Naruto 590 is best chapter ever… if you love Itachi.

Thank you to last chappy reviewers! I uploaded on a Monday last chapter which always seems like the worst possible time, so I am glad people took the trouble.

Thanks for coming back for chapter 21! (let me know if you did… T_T)

PLEASE NOTE: there are a lot of mature situations in this story, and especially this chapter. It falls under this site's guidelines, though! I am worried because of the policing that happened on earlier with entire stories being removed. FYI, I was here writing fanfic when they first initiated the guidelines and came up with the rating system they use now (it used to be the movie rating system, which they had to change because it is licensed). At worst, this story is like a rated R movie, or something you might see in late night TV, which is totally acceptable. Please don't report it.

White Rain

Chapter 21

By Zapenstap

Sasuke faced the window of the hospital room, his hand resting lightly on the saya of his katana, listening with half an ear to Shikamaru and Sakura argue with Naruto about the details of Konoha's strike on the Grass. He didn't need to interfere in their conversation with his own opinions. They all knew what part he would be playing.

I'm getting Itachi's daughter back, he thought. *Personally . And by any means necessary.* The best Naruto could hope to do was make it easier for him.

The girl's mother was sitting in a chair directly in his line of eyesight. Lucia had been silent since her confession, staring through the window glass with haunted eyes. Sometimes she would shiver, tiny ripples raising bumps on her skin. Occasionally she would look over shoulder at Naruto, catching some piece of the conversation, but she didn't interfere. She barely seemed to be holding herself together.

Naruto had called her a tank *,* but now that he knew who she was, Sasuke saw her as more of a tower, a slender stone fortress standing tall on a high, far away hill, silent and impenetrable. *But every fortress has a weakness. Lucia's children are her vulnerability. Her defenses have been breached.*

It didn't matter how much his brother knew about Lucia, Sasuke decided, what he thought of her plans or even how he felt about her. It didn't matter if Itachi Uchiha had anticipated that Sasuke would meet her or not. All that mattered was that both of the children were his.

Sasuke avoided looking at Kakashi, who was still leaning against the wall, though he was no longer reading. He was included in the discussion about the Grass, but mostly seemed to be listening. Kakashi hadn't said a word directly to Sasuke, but in the quiet moments, Sasuke could feel his old teacher's eyes—well, the right eye anyway—train on him, watching him and evaluating. He thought he knew what that was about.

Don't lecture me , he thought fiercely, clutching the saya tightly where his blade was cradled. He completely avoided looking at Sakura. *Don't.*

"You can't empty the village of Shinobi," Shikamaru was telling Naruto. "You have to leave defenses, and the defenses need to be enough to cover the village in case of invasion, however unlikely. I

know that prudence isn't your strongest card, so I really have to insist on it."

"Right, okay," Naruto finally relented. "But it's got to be *big* , so big that-"

"I *get* it," Shikamaru interrupted. "I understand your plan. But you don't need to leave the village undefended. If we take three thousand Shinobi, which is far more than Ithink we need, we will have enough power to completely level the Grass … if it comes to it."

"We aren't going to do that," Naruto said quickly.

"You have to be *ready* to do that," Shikamaru reminded him.

"I know. I know. But that's why it's got to be really big. How about five thousand?"

"Three thousand," Shikamaru said evenly.

"Four thousand."

"Three thousand and one."

"Ugh!"

The plan wasn't that complicated really. Naruto's plans were rarely complicated. They had unexpected surprises, for the enemy, but were pretty straightforward in conception. The plan was to send a small delegation to the Grass, with the façade of dealing for the girl. Meanwhile, a search and seizure team composed of Sasuke, Hinata, and Shino, would infiltrate the Grass village and locate and recapture Rina. The real surprise was that the rest of Konoha's forces would surround the Grass village in secrecy.

If all went according to plan, the strike team wouldn't even have to fight their way out. Naruto hoped to intimidate the Grass into immediate submission, but Shikamaru was right to push him on his tactics. If the Grass chose to fight, Konoha would have to subdue

them and though they were sure to win, there would be cost of life, and their enemies might escape.

"How are we going to convince them the delegation is real?" Sakura said. "If it looks suspicious, they might attack right off. And if the strike team is discovered-"

"We play off their assumptions," Shikamaru answered. "Everyone knows how hard Naruto has worked for peace between the villages. That is the tact we have been taking with them since the beginning. A delegation plays into their expectations. But you are right, Sakura. It needs to look real. They need to see a resolution being possible. Who we send is important. It has to look like we really mean to deal."

"Well, I am going," Naruto said, crossing his arms. "I will lead the delegation. How much more real does it get than dealing directly with the Hokage?"

"You can't go," Shikamaru pointed out.

"Of course I'm going," Naruto countered. "I'm leading."

"You can't go yourself, Naruto," Shikamaru said in that flat, overly reasonable tone of voice that was such a dramatic contrast to the way Naruto ever said or did anything. "The Hokage has to stay in the village."

Sasuke smirked. *Good luck with that.*

"I'll do that too," Naruto replied, thoroughly nonplussed.

There was a pause. Then Shikamaru sighed heavily.

"What?" Naruto demanded. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No. Nothing," Shikamaru grumbled. "Of course you will do *both* . Honestly, I don't even know why I bother advising you. You always do what you want."

"You think I *can't* do both?"

"I *know* you can! Never mind. I'm not going to waste time on this. Go if you want, but you can't be the one to lead the delegation. The Grass will flip if they see you straight off, and no offense, but you just proved that negotiation isn't your strongest card. You weren't the one I was thinking to send for legitimacy."

"Who did you want to send?"

"Lucia."

Silence followed this statement. Even Sasuke was startled. Lucia turned her head at the sound of her name.

"Ah," Kakashi said. "They will think *she* is dealing, and that she bought a team of Shinobi to protect her. When they see her coming they will focus on whether she means to deal, declare war, or surrender."

"But she didn't," Naruto frowned. "Buy Shinobi, I mean. This one is on me."

"They don't know that," Shikamaru told him. "And they shouldn't know that until we have Rina safely in our care. They can't know you are backing Lucia with the full strength of the village. If you show Konoha's intentions too soon, you will make them desperate. You will put them against a wall. All they have to do is put a knife to Rina's throat and it's an instant stalemate. We make a move and they hurt her. We don't and they know they have us in their control. Or they kill her and it's an all out battle. We can't let it get to that point."

"So you want to send Lucia to negotiate the life of her own daughter?" Sakura said.

"That's right," Shikamaru said. "From what I've seen of Lucia, I think she can do it."

"I can do it," Lucia echoed. Her voice was cool, though her expression was fraught with grief. "I understand what you are saying."

"Only you know the full extent of your assets," Shikamaru told her. "So you would have to be the one to negotiate anyway. We'll have Shinobi to protect you."

"I don't care about protection. The negotiation will be simple. I will offer to trade myself for my daughter."

No one said anything. Sasuke could tell by Lucia's voice that she was quite serious.

"That's not a bad idea," Shikamaru said unexpectedly.

"We aren't going to *trade* ," Naruto said. "That isn't a solution."

"No," Shikamaru said, "but it's not a bad idea to make them *think* we will. They want Lucia and we want to save an Academy child of the Leaf. They will even believe that Lucia would want that, if Gehard knows her at all. It might work. It is why they took the girl in the first place."

Naruto's expression knotted. Sasuke watched him circumspectly. Naruto always had a harder time with plans that involved too much subterfuge. He was so straight-forward himself, most of the time. "Okay, Shikamaru, if you say so," he said slowly. "Lucia goes, but we don't actually trade her. Who protects her?"

"Myself and Ino," Shikamaru said. "I especially want Ino. I think if we leave Chouji here with the defenses, we can use her on this mission."

What does he want with Ino? Sasuke wondered. *Mind reading? Medical ninjutsu? Body switch?* Or maybe it was just that Lucia and Ino were friends?

"I'll need fighters as well," Shikamaru continued. "Neji, Lee, and Tenten always do nicely. Lee's taijutsu and Neji's eyes will be useful. Tenten is deft with long-distance weapons and she has a calming effect in tense situations. She also knows Rina, which might help us."

"Okay," Naruto said. "That's five Jounin. And five I definitely trust with Lucia."

"While we are negotiating, Rina must be found and rescued." Shikamaru continued. "We will send Hinata and Shino to scout. Between the two of them, locating the girl should be easy. Sasuke will physically retrieve her."

"I'm going with him," Naruto said. "Well, one of me will."

I don't need help , Sasuke thought grimly, but Naruto shot him a flat stare that suggested otherwise.

"I want you with Konoha's main forces, Naruto," Shikamaru reminded him. " *And* in Konoha."

"Right. *And* with Sasuke. That's what I'm saying."

Shikamaru sighed. "Fine. What about the Genin teams? You promised Itachi he could go."

"The Genin will be on the outside," Naruto said. "Itachi's team and Yukio's team will support the strike team's infiltration. They will stay out of the fighting, but will assist as needed and they will receive Rina when she is rescued. They will be the first to report back on success. They'll need Jounin with them, of course."

"I will lead my team," Sakura said.

It was the first Sasuke had heard that Itachi—or any of the Genin—were even being considered for the mission, but it was Sakura voicing her own involvement that caused a jolt to run through him.

No . It was an impulse. He almost said it out loud.

Kakashi noticed. His old teacher was definitely watching him with that lazy look. Sasuke recovered his expression, returning Kakashi's gaze coolly.

Shikamaru eyed Sakura uncertainly.

"Are you sure, Sakura?" Naruto asked her.

"Of course," Sakura said. "I don't feel comfortable letting Itachi anywhere *near* a battlefield with his eye in the condition it's in and I don't trust anyone to operate on him except me, should that be necessary. Besides, if anything goes wrong, you will need healers. I have to go." Her expression was stonily set.

Sasuke's insides were roiling.

No.

He glanced imploringly at Kakashi.

His old sensei noticed. Kakashi raised his eyebrows in surprise. Silently, he placed a bookmark in the pages of his comic and closed the cover. "I will help with the Genin," he said. "The boy has a new Sharingan. Someone has to show him how to use it and Sasuke has…a lot…to be thinking about." He gave Sasuke a pointed glance. There was a lecture in there somewhere.

Sasuke felt his jaw tighten.

No. I have to focus.

Naruto didn't notice the tension. He was grinning. "Great!"

"One more thing," Shikamaru said. "Getting there. It's going to take time and you can't hide the movement of that many people. They will see us coming."

"I want to transport everyone," Naruto said, crossing his arms. "So we can engage the Grass tomorrow. I want to *resolve* this tomorrow."

Sasuke sucked in his breath. That jutsu was a variation of the Fourth Hokage's technique, rather like a reverse summons. With it, Naruto could transport everybody, saving them days in travel. It would get Sasuke to Rina faster than if he was still on his way to the Grass now.

"I was hoping you would be up for it," Shikamaru said. "But that's a lot of people, Naruto. To do that jutsu *and* fight-"

"It's fine," Naruto said. "It's not that many. It's more about mass than number anyway."

"Don't you need to have the location marked?"

"I'm on my way to marking it now. I'll be there in time."

He's already sent a clone ahead , Sasuke thought wonderingly. *Probably at the same time he came for me. Maybe sooner.*

Shikamaru looked up at the ceiling, thinking. "If you can really do it, you will not only save us time but also gain us the element of surprise. But are you *sure* you have the chakra? *Plus* reserves for all the clones you want? *And* actual fighting, should there be any?"

"I have *plenty* of chakra," Naruto said.

"All right," Shikamaru said. "That changes the setting a little, but the game plan still holds."

He began outlining the rest of the mission parameters. Konoha's forces would be divided into sections that were in turn broken down into squads, including all of the available Genin, though their role was mostly supportive. Naruto suggested having one of his clones in *every* group. They were getting to the small details—who reported to

who, who specifically would do what—when a knock sounded at the door.

"It's Ibiki," the voice said. "The Jounin are ready for you, Hokage."

Shikamaru and Naruto shared a look.

"Here we go," Shikamaru said.

Naruto walked over to Lucia. He put a hand on her shoulder. Sasuke saw her start, though it was barely perceptible. "Everything is going to be fine," Naruto told her.

Lucia said nothing.

"Believe it," Naruto said, and straightened. He turned to Shikamaru. "Let's get the Jounin on board with this."

Shikamaru crossed his hands behind his head, under his top knot, and followed Naruto out of the room. Kakashi tucked his comic behind his vest, shot Sasuke a significant look that might have meant anything, and retreated after them.

That left Sasuke alone in the room with Lucia and Sakura.

Sasuke eased his hand off the saya. He turned to Lucia. "Lucia," Sasuke said softly.

She turned to look at him. Her face was as pale as moonlight, shadowed by clouds of dark hair, wayward tendrils curling around her cheeks. Her eyes fixed on his face, dark as molasses and framed with thick lashes. Their depths were luminous, full of intelligence, but also worry and vulnerability. She looked very tired.

She's carrying a great weight , he thought. *Too many secrets.* He wondered if his brother had seen that. Maybe he identified with it.

"You are overwrought," Sasuke told her. "You must rest. It will be at least an hour or two before anything happens."

"I can't," Lucia replied.

Sasuke approached her. He walked right up to side of her chair, rested his hand on the back, and leaned toward her face. She looked startled, turning her head to stare at him, but it was too late by then. He activated the Sharingan. Her recognition was instant, but it did her no good.

"Go to sleep," he ordered. "I need you to be a fortress."

Lucia's eyes became heavy-lidded instantly. She slumped in her chair, going limp as a rag doll. It was like she was made to fall under Genjutsu.

No , he thought, remembering. *She's just had a lot of practice.*

Sasuke lifted her easily, scooping her up behind her shoulders and under the knees. He carried her to the bed her son had vacated and laid her on the mattress. Asleep, she looked different. There were no walls or calculation in her expression. Her white silk dress was the same color as the sheets beneath her. Her skin was almost as pale. Only the waves of dark hair fanning out against the pillowcase gave her any definition of color.

He turned away…right into Sakura, whose accusing eyes cut him like blades.

"She will be better rested than if she had fallen asleep naturally," he explained. That was a benefit of sleep through hypnotism, though she might find it difficult to wake up. If she was the type to dream, her dreams would be particularly vivid.

Sakura didn't say anything. She just turned on her heel and walked stiffly from the room.

What did I do now?

"Sakura—"

She didn't stop.

He sprinted to the door, passed through the waiting room, and finally caught sight of her down the hall. "Sakura!"

Sakura darted through a side door that hung open on its hinge. He knew where it led—to the back rooms behind the ward where she had an office and a wash station for preparing for surgery. "Don't follow me!" she shot at him from around the frame. "I have to prepare."

He followed her.

She moved ahead of him, light on her feet, and didn't look back. She just opened the door at the end of the hall and darted through. He caught it before she had time to shut it, forcing his way in. She staggered back.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "I told you not to follow me!"

"Why are you running?"

"Why do you *care* ? You obviously don't have anything to say to me, so what are you chasing me for?"

Say to her? Was he supposed to say something to her? He reached for her. "Sakura—"

She pulled back, wrenching her arm out of his reach. "No. Forget it. I don't want to talk. And I don't want to be seen with you. You made your choice. Please go! I have to get ready for the mission."

The room was small. It was roughly square, with shelves in the corner and a stainless steel medical examination table shoved up against the wall, under which there were baskets of supplies. Otherwise, there wasn't much in it. He saw nothing that Sakura needed, except an escape from him.

He shut the door behind him, locking them both in.

"Don't go on this mission," he whispered.

Sakura's green eyes widened with confusion. "What?"

He didn't repeat it. He knew she heard him.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "Why wouldn't I go?"

He just looked at her.

She seemed to understand without him having to elaborate. "Oh, *Sasuke* ," she said. "You can't be serious! I am *barely* pregnant. I was *on* a mission when I realized—"

"I know," he said. "And look what happened. Sakura, please. I can't lose you."

He thought that might appease her, him wanting to keep her safe, but it seemed to anger her instead. He saw the flash in her eyes, fierce and furious. " *Lose* me? *Lose* me? Sasuke, you already lost me. You broke up with me, remember? We aren't together." She pointed a finger at him, angry. "And just now, you—!"

"That's not what I mean," he interrupted, grabbing her hand and holding it tightly. "It's not the same. You know it isn't."

For a moment, she seemed flummoxed. But the anger didn't evaporate. If anything, her temper flared. She yanked her hand from his grasp. "Despite what you may think, I am not incompetent at this Shinobi stuff!"

"You will be useful, but there will be stress," Sasuke pushed. "Battlefields are never easy, even if things go exactly as Naruto hopes-"

"Stress?" She seemed confused. Then recognition seemed to come over her.

He didn't expect her reaction.

She shoved both hands against his chest, pushing him hard enough to make him grunt. Her teeth were gritted together, fury in her green eyes. "I can't *believe* you! You're worried about the *baby* ? Sasuke, you don't even want this child! Why should I care *what* you think anyway? Like you know anything about babies! I could get punched out and still have a healthy child. Or I could stay at home in bed all day and lose it! And I don't—"

He kissed her.

He didn't think about it. He just did it. She was so angry. She was beautiful when she was angry, alive with fury, like an electric current, but in that moment he wanted her to shut up. He leaned in, reaching out with one hand to hold her face still, and kissed her.

The action surprised her so much that she froze. She was as stiff as a board, her muscles locked into rigidity. And then, all at once, she started shaking. Sasuke pulled slowly back. Her eyes stared into his, inches from his face, pale green, bright and wide, her expression knotted, her lower lip quivering. There was not much space between them. It felt like an eternity since he had touched her. He was so close to her torso that he could feel her chest move with her breathing. Her breaths were quickening. He had always had that effect on her. She was having an effect on him too.

He tried to clear his head. "Stay home," he implored. "Stay in bed all day."

Her gaze hardened. "No." But it sounded desperate. " *Please* go."

He shouldn't have kissed her. He realized it belatedly. Because he wanted to kiss her again. He missed her. He had spent too many hours trying to avoid thinking about her, telling himself he didn't need her, that he was wrong for her. The truth came over him in a rush. Maybe he didn't need her, but he *wanted* her. Maybe that was wrong, but he did, and the moment he admitted it, the urgency overwhelmed everything. Maybe it was her proximity. Maybe it was

her obstinacy. He came here for something specific, to convince her to stay out of harm's way, but now he didn't know *what* he was doing.

In two breaths, he moved in, lifted her, his hands grasping her around the waist, and set her on the edge of the medical table, at eye-level with him. Her knees came up to either of his him. The muscles in her legs tightened.

"What are you…?" she gasped.

He pulled her head in close, his fingers tangling in her hair behind her head, right at the roots, and kissed her again.

She melted, her words disintegrating into sighs in his mouth from her parted lips. He pulled her closer. Her mouth opened wider, and he took that as an invitation. His blood was hot and getting hotter. Her skin felt like a furnace. Tentatively, he slid his free hand up her leg. She didn't object, so he quested higher, reaching under skirt, right at the hip, and then down... She gasped in his mouth, her face flushed, pulse flashing in her throat. She was so tense, trying to hold it all together. But she *wanted* his touch. She needed it.

He barely had to touch her at all. It was a minute, maybe two, before he had her shuddering. As she came down, he released her hair, turning his hand and dragging the back of it softly against her cheek. The faint sheen of perspiration on her skin made him feel drunk. He stared at her lips. They were strawberry red and slightly parted. He wanted to kiss them again. He wanted to push her down on the table.

The slap took him by surprise. Her eyes had snapped open, green and blazing. The sting of her hand against his cheek was sharp. It was followed immediately by a rush of heat and pain.

She shoved him back so she could get off the table. There were tears in her eyes. "I can't believe you! I can't believe *me* ! I don't even know what I…!" She sucked her lips between her teeth, staring

daggers at him, and turned. Her hand was on the door. "Never again!"

"Sakura-"

She whirled as he approached her. He stopped. "That was *awful* , Sasuke!"

"I know. I mean, no. I don't know." He shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. "I don't think it was awful, but I'm... I just… Sakura, listen. Please."

"To *what* ? What do you *want* from me?"

"I've been thinking."

She hesitated. "You have?" Her expression contracted, her brow furrowing.

He didn't answer.

"What do you *mean* you've been thinking?" she demanded. "Thinking about what? Do you… Have you changed your mind?" Her face looked wary, guarded, but there was hope in her eyes. "Do you want to be with me…as a family?"

He could see the wheels turning in her head, working through the events of the day, thinking that he had accepted Itachi, and the little girl, Rina, as his brother's children, then to accept Sakura and their child was an easy next step. They could be together, live together, raise a family together…. And maybe it *was* that easy, but he just felt overwhelmed. He didn't want to think about the future. He just wanted everyone safe, including Sakura, someone he loved.

"I'm lost." He had never spoken a truer word to her. "I don't know. I just wish-"

She cut him off, fury surging back into her face. "Oh, I think I know what you wish! Is that what you thought would happen? That you

could just…take me? I don't owe you *anything* , Sasuke, so don't ask! This was… This was stupid. *You* are stupid. Ugh."

She flung open the door and exited the room, slamming it behind her, and leaving him in the dark.

He stood there for three heartbeats, maybe more.

Clarity came to him in a crash.

No…

"Wait!"

She was sprinting ahead.

"Sakura, wait!"

He caught her halfway down the hall. She tried to punch him, but he blocked it, turning her wrist to disable her and pulling her close to him so she couldn't hurt him, or herself, trying to break free.

"Listen to me," he breathed. "Please. I'm not just trying to seduce you. I don't want to hurt you—"

"Then stop doing it!"

"All right," he said. "I'm sorry."

It was the first time he had said that to her, even after everything. He felt the significance of it.

She slumped. "Let me go."

But he didn't. He couldn't.

" *Please* , Sasuke."

"I don't want to." He pressed his face against her hair, whispering the words fiercely into her neck just below her ear. "Naruto was right. I don't….I don't want to lose you. Sakura, I panicked. I made a rash decision. I thought I was not able to take care of you, and that I am dealing with too much to be good to you, and I…I still think that, but I thought that about those kids too, and now… Now, I don't know. I do know that I love you. If you can be patient-"

But Sakura was shaking her head. Violently. She squirmed free of his embrace, untangling his arms from around her body and staggering out his reach. She half fell against the far wall. "I can't. I can't. I understand. Really I do. But I can't. I miss you, Sasuke. I miss you so much, I can't stand it. I know you made a rash decision, but I also know that you meant it. I know what you are doing now. I know what I am doing. Loving you and biding the time, thinking maybe tomorrow or the next day you will be ready, that we can just go slow and leave things open until you are. But I also know now that you are not trying to *get* anywhere with me. I am not enough. I can *never* measure up. I can wait forever and I will *never* be enough."

He was bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

"You almost left this village. Just now. And you didn't even *think* of me."

Was *that* what she thought? "Sakura, I wasn't leaving *you* . That wasn't about you! Would you rather I had abandoned Rina?"

He had been so worried about Rina, so enraged, he could barely think clearly. *Itachi's daughter.* Sakura had to understand. Sasuke had to save her. He *would* save her. At any cost. But… It was better not to think of Rina right now…not until he could do something.

Hurry, Naruto.

"Of course I don't want you to abandon Rina!" Sakura gasped, "but don't you understand? You don't even *think* of me! I would have gone

with you. You could have at least included me, but you don't even think of me. You don't consider me at all! You were just going to disappear! Maybe forever!"

He was silent. Slowly, he released her. She stepped away and turned, running her hand across her eyes.

"And then that display just now, with Lucia—"

He cut her off. "Sakura, stop. If you think you are…competing…with Lucia, you don't understand. It's not-"

"But I *do* understand! I *know* I am not competing with Lucia."

"Then why are you so jealous?"

"I'm not jeal-!" But she stopped herself. "No," she said, her face sobering. "You are right. I *am* jealous. I am horribly jealous. But not of Lucia. She's not the one I'm competing with." She took a deep breath.

Sasuke didn't understand. He was bewildered. "Sakura, there is no one else. I haven't been with anyone else. I don't even *think* about anyone else. If I were to choose anyone to build a family with, it would be you. I've told you that!"

"I am not talking about another *woman* . Sasuke, it's your brother's *ghost* that I'm jealous of."

She said it so clearly, so resignedly. It hit him in the face like a brick.

There were tears in her eyes. "Itachi matters more than *anything* to you. More than I do. More than your baby does apparently. And I am angry with you about that. I am *so* angry. But I can't be angry. Because your brother is dead and he was so important to you and it feels selfish and wrong to be jealous of a dead person who suffered so much for you. So instead of being angry, I feel *stupid* , knowing

that there is nothing I can do, because *nothing* matters to you like Itachi does and maybe nothing ever will."

Sasuke didn't say anything. Silence drifted between them like fog, blurring space and awareness and his sense of self.

"I don't know what you want me to do," he said. "I can't forget Itachi. I can't forget what he did to me, how he treated me, how much he cared about me, what he *sacrificed* for me. I've tried. I—"

"I know. Itachi will always be important to you," Sakura said, her voice cracking. "I know that. But he is *everything* to you. He comes before everything. I mean, even when things between us were really good, I still felt like I was trying to squeeze into this little crevice of space left in your heart, somewhere on the periphery around the huge blot that is Itachi and…. I just can't live like that, Sasuke. I can't exist like that, especially not with this baby, *your* baby, which will soon be living and breathing and *should* be the most important thing in the world to you, even if I am not."

He couldn't speak. He couldn't quite grasp it. A baby…

"I don't know the answer," she said, scrubbing tears from the corner of her eyes with her fingers. "All I know is that being near you is really hard. And I don't know how you can be involved with this child, or if you should be. I don't want your child to feel about you the way I do—always competing for attention and never feeling like it's enough, to not even be recognized as part of your family. I don't know. Maybe…" Her voice became hoarse. "Maybe… *after* Rina is saved, maybe *I* should leave the village."

He stiffened.

"Everyone has use for medical ninjutsu," she said. "I could do a lot of good for a lot of people."

"No." He couldn't stand the thought of it. "No. Sakura, I don't want you to leave the village."

"I don't know what else to do. I feel suffocated, being around you and not being loved by you—"

"I *do* love you!" The emotion was raw in his voice, so thick that is surprised him. "If you doubt it—"

She shook her head. "But I don't come first. You *know* I don't. I don't know where I am on your list of priorities, but it's not at the top. You never stop to consider how I feel, and as long as that is true, I will disappointed by everything you do."

The panic he was starting to feel was blinding.

Don't leave.

Sakura had always *been* there. Always. Even when it was painful, worse than painful, she had stood by him, like a pillar, like a mountain, unmovable and unshakable, something he could rely on. To think she might just…leave…was like the very ground beneath his feet was giving way. "Can we…can we talk about this? I know I have…quite a few problems. Everything you've said is true. But there has to be some other solution. I don't want you to leave the village. What about…What about your team? What about Naruto? Your friends? If you're having a baby, surely the road—"

"I don't know," she said. "I haven't thought out all the details. I can stay awhile with the Genin, at least until they find masters for the Chuunin exams. I just think I need time to myself. Away from…away from you. I was thinking I could travel, the way Tsunade used to, or live somewhere else temporarily while I figure out what I want to do. I'll still belong to the village. Maybe I'll take someone with me—an apprentice or… I don't know right now. I'm still thinking."

He could barely breathe. "I think you should stay." He thought she understood what she wanted. She wanted him to commit to her. He thought he *had* , before, but clearly he hadn't. It wasn't just a matter of choosing her over other women. She wanted more from him than that. She wanted- "What do I have to do?" he said.

She looked at him helplessly. The answer was immediate. "Let go of Itachi."

His throat felt clogged.

Her expression was sympathetic, shimmering with tears. "I know he is your brother. I know what he meant to you. I know what he did for you. But you have to let go of his ghost. I don't mean you should forget him, but stop making all of your decisions around him. If you really love me, then I need to come first. I need to be part of your family, your living family. The living should come before the dead."

"I-" He wanted to say that of course she came before the dead, but the words would not come. He just looked at her, trying to communicate his frustration and desperation. He loved her. But he saw what she was saying—it was exactly what he had said to her, just more to the point. The problem was with him, and it wasn't that he didn't love her. He could never love another woman more. But his commitment to Sakura paled beside his attachment to his past. Putting Sakura first meant putting Itachi second…

I can't. I don't know how.

Sakura's eyes were sad. And all too understanding. "I know," she said.

Lucia was missing something. Something important. Something she had to find.

Rina , she thought, and was immediately overcome, sinking into an ocean of mental anguish. *I lost Rina* .

But the Hokage had vowed to save her daughter. She remembered now. She had gone with him to the Village Hidden in the Grass to negotiate Rina's release. Something had happened and somehow she had ended up alone, here. All around her there was green. Green grass, rice fields, leaves, trees. She was in the countryside.

I used to live here.

She recognized where she was suddenly. Her old cottage stood before her, the one she had rented when she came to the Land of Fire ten years ago. It was a rural dwelling, nestled in the hills just off the main road, on the way to many places but nowhere immediate. It was practically invisible unless one knew where to look. She had loved this cottage. She loved its thatched roof, the stone fireplace, and the dark wood floors that were slightly warped. She had loved the land surrounding it, empty and open, with fields of rice stretching endlessly in one direction and forests running up the mountains in the backyard.

Why would Rina be here?

The thought brought a wave of panic.

Sweet Rina, her little girl, quiet and dutiful and brimming with talent. Lucia had been focused on Itachi, on securing his place among the Shinobi and educating him on his responsibilities, so focused that she had given little thought to Rina. Rina was a little girl. Rina was safe. That was enough. Itachi was the one Lucia depended upon to succeed her.

She hadn't meant to discount Rina. It wasn't that Rina *couldn't* be her heir, but Lucia knew her daughter; she was not made for business and balance sheets. Rina was special. Itachi would rise to responsibility the way he always had, but Rina…Rina was a treasure. When Rina matured, she would do…whatever she wanted. Lucia just hadn't told her. She hadn't wanted to be presumptuous of her victory. She was too afraid. And her daughter had clearly suffered for it. She must have felt so lost and ignored. All the things she held dear were taken from her, and she was trapped in a world that was so vastly different from anything she had known, and treated as so much less important than her brother. Lucia's heart felt like it was going to burst.

I should have told her. Just once would have been enough. Rina Rina, there is music on your horizon. As much as you can stand. You can sing and dance and play piano. You can travel the world. You can do whatever you want. Rina, I love you as much as I love your brother. Rina…

She hurried toward the cottage.

She wasn't certain why she was here or what she hoped to find, but she remembered it well. She had stayed here between business trips, waiting for the governing powers of her numerous prospects to make decisions. Some of the time she spent in the country was taken up by work-the reading of documents, signing of contracts, and in penning letters-but most of her time was spent just living and soaking up the solitude.

It was a surreal time in her life. Before coming to the Land of Fire, her every moment had been a parade. She was always guarded, watching others watching her. Judging her. In the Land of Fire, she was no one. She lived alone in the middle of nowhere. She cooked for herself, cleaned her own home, and traveled without escort. She relished the quiet. The anonymity. The complete and utter independence.

And Itachi Uchiha, who came repeatedly to her door.

Who knew *why* he came. She had been the aggressor in the beginning, drawing him in those first few times and arranging everything so that it would be simple to enjoy. But after that… His travels would have brought him within miles of her often enough, but the volition to separate himself from his companions and find her, even if just for a night…that was his decision.

She didn't know what he risked, or why he risked it, but she knew what he wanted. His intent was obvious enough. She could still remember the feel of his hands, the touch of his lips on the back of her neck, the way he held her, cradling the contours of her body against his chest and arms like she was some exquisite piece of art.

It was so markedly different from what she was used to. He didn't expect her to please him. He just found her a pleasure. She had never experienced that before. He was forceful sometimes, but it was the forcefulness of urgency—of a man who was starving. His hunger, to her, seemed to be for beauty. For softness. Sweet words. A gentle touch.

And she had asked him to hurt her. And he had done it.

I had him wrong , she thought.

Maybe Ibiki was right and she need not feel so guilty. The pain she wanted to feel, and that he had agreed to inflict, was, as Ibiki ascertained, a kind of communication—perhaps the strongest kind. Maybe he really had wanted the same thing she did. What was it exactly that she had wanted? Something completely different than anything she had experienced before. Intimacy without having to speak of what she could not speak about. Trust. Absolution. Understanding. Maybe that was why, toward the end, when they understood each other better, he changed the rules.

And I wanted *to pretend with him* , she thought, thinking of the snow. *I was frightened of it, what it meant, but I wanted it. I wanted to believe that this cottage was no more than it appeared, with the two of us in it, caring for each other, shut away from the rest of the world, as if we really lived here and our true lives were the illusion. I wanted to play that game.*

No.

I didn't want it to be a game. I wanted to keep him.

What would have happened if she had said so?

She could easily imagine his surprise, and also his answer. He would have told her it was impossible. He couldn't stay. And she couldn't either. She had a child. And a mission, a vendetta. She had to go back. And he had his own commitments. But even so…

I wish I had said something.

With her resources, she could have offered him anything, anything in the world, any incentive, beyond what he might imagine was even possible. They could have run. He could have come with her, started life over, somewhere far, far away. But there were some things that money could not fix. No amount of wealth could change the circumstances of his past. She could not bring his family back to life or cure him of guilt or regret or whatever it was that made him so numb. Nothing she could buy would have stopped him from dying either. She couldn't have saved him. And even if she could, he would not have wanted her to change who he was or the path he had chosen. He had matters to resolve, matters that were much more important than she was. She knew that instinctively, as well as she knew that she would not have changed her course for him either. Not really.

But I did want it. I fantasized about it. I still do.

As she reached the door, it started to rain. And then she saw it. There was a light on in the cottage.

But no one lives here now…

She pushed open the door, her heart beating wildly.

"I don't understand," she breathed, taking in the site.

He was *there* . Itachi Uchiha. He was alive. She saw him, perfect in every detail, sitting on a low-back couch by the fireplace. He was dressed in Shinobi black, but he wasn't wearing his cloak. She didn't see it anywhere in the room. A fire was lit, burning in the heart. And Rina… Her heart jumped. Rina was there, whole and safe, curled up against her father's side, asleep in the crook of his arm. Her fingers were curled up under her chin, the way she had slept when she was a baby.

Lucia started crying. "I don't understand! How is this possible?"

Itachi raised a finger to his lips. "A jutsu," he whispered.

Lucia didn't understand jutsu, but she lowered her voice, so as not to wake Rina. "I thought you were *dead* . How-?"

"A jutsu," he repeated, and beckoned her closer.

Lucia couldn't disagree. He was the Shinobi. Perhaps there were jutsu that could raise the dead, or rewind time, or create new worlds. She didn't know, but she wanted to be closer, so she approached. Itachi made room for her on the couch, shifting Rina over, who murmured sleepily but didn't wake up. Lucia didn't wait for a space to fully open. She didn't care about sitting. She flung her arms around Itachi's neck, pulling herself close to him, surprised when he did not give way or vanish. "You are alive! You are alive and you saved her," she wept. "You saved her. She is yours. Did you know?"

His body felt just like she remembered—his shoulders broad and steady. He smelled just liked she remembered—a pleasant, clean and earthy scent. It was so real. He was really alive. His arm came around her back, pulling her securely against him. She was half on his lap and half in the space on the couch beside him. She could not stop the tears. Her body felt like it was breaking apart.

"She is safe," Itachi told her. "Everything is fine." His fingers were in her hair. He had always seemed fascinated by the curls. They were rare in his country.

"I am so sorry," she wept into his neck. "I should have told you. I should have told you everything. There is so much that I kept back, that I held off-."

"I know."

She stopped crying. Of course he did. "Rina is well?" she asked. "She isn't hurt?"

"She is unharmed."

She had never heard anything so good.

She wrapped her fingers around Itachi's hand. It felt so familiar. His skin was warm to the touch. She pulled on his arm, trying to get him to rise. She wanted to speak to him alone. She had to tell him something. "Please," she said. "I want to talk to you." The bedroom was just over her shoulder, past the kitchen, through a door. It was a quiet, private space. There was a bed she remembered well. If she said it right-

But he wouldn't rise from the couch.

"Itachi," she repeated. She focused on his hand, the smoothness of his palm against calluses on his fingers. It was so real. She remembered this hand. She kissed the knuckles. *Get up. You are alive and I need you. Please get up.* "I just have something I need to say—"

The door opened.

Lucia turned. It was her son entering the cottage, shaking snow off his shoulders. Had it gotten colder? She remembered rain. Her son smiled at her, dark eyes shining. Two eyes. His damaged eye was whole.

Of course , she thought. *There was a second surgery. Sakura fixed it. I need to thank her.*

"You look happy," her son said. He looked taller than she remembered.

He is growing up. He looks more like his father every day.

"I am happy," she replied. "Look, your father is here. He has brought Rina home."

The relief on her son's face was evident. "I've been looking *everywhere* for her. The Hokage was worried."

She vaguely remembered…

"Sasuke and Sakura want to come to dinner," her son said, truncated her train of thought. "Is that okay?"

"Yes," Lucia replied. She felt confused, losing the thread of the conversation, but wasn't sure why. She tried to remember what was in the pantry. "I think we have enough."

"I'm going to change," her son said, and rounded the corner to head up the stairs to his room.

Did this house have two floors? The house is Konoha did. Sakura and Sasuke lived in Konoha. They were coming to dinner. She glanced out the window, to catch a glimpse of the village outside.

Lucia turned back. Itachi Uchiha was still there. He was gazing contentedly into the fire. He seemed…content. Rina was still right next to him, peaceful and asleep. Lucia grabbed onto Itachi's wrist with both hands pulled, more forcefully this time. "I really must talk to you. Alone."

She flushed, but even when she was that obvious, he wouldn't get up. Was it because the kids were here? Rina was asleep. Her son was upstairs. She leaned in close. When her lover didn't move, she kissed him softly on the lips. It felt… She had never tasted anything so wonderful. She kissed him again. His hand cupped her cheek, caressing the spot just below her ear with his thumb. He kissed her back.

But he didn't move.

"Are you okay?" she asked him. "Are you hurt? Are you ill?"

She remembered the night he had vomited blood on her floor.

"It's a jutsu."

She lifted her face. "You keep *saying* that."

He regarded her silently, black eyes surrounded by thick dark lashes. The care lines in his face added a level of pensiveness to his expression that struck her forcibly. He was always so serious. But this was a safe place. The hand on her face felt so warm. But…

She felt sudden dread.

No.

The cottage in the countryside and the house in Konoha are not the same house.

"Are you really here?" she asked him, her stomach fluttering. "Are you really alive?"

"It's a jutsu."

She understood.

A genjutsu.

She wanted to scream.

No. I am dreaming this.

She looked to the window, trying to get her bearings, but snow was piling up outside the house. It was blinding. She couldn't see anything.

Wake up…

She felt tears welling up again in her eyes. She pressed her face into Itachi's neck to stop them, her lips against his skin. But it did no good. She could taste the salt. " *No* ."

I don't want to.

She felt his hand touch her head, oh so softly, almost apologetically.

"I just wanted to tell you," she whispered, feeling the urgency of time slipping away and the space shrinking. "I think I love you."

All I wanted…

"I think I'm in love with you!"

And then it all burst apart, not just Itachi Uchiha, but all of it, shattering into a storm of black feathers.

Itachi's injured eye was starting to hurt. Whatever numbing agent Sakura had used for the surgery was beginning to wear off and he could feel just how messed up it was now. In the dark, he couldn't see anything, but the muscles around the eye were coming back to life and they ached. He kept touching it.

Maybe I should just have let Sakura remove it, he thought. But he didn't want to go back into surgery. There wasn't time. And he really didn't want to lose his eye just yet, not before he had to. An eye that hurt was better than no eye. Besides, maybe he wouldn't injure it worse. If he didn't, maybe he could keep it. Maybe it would even improve a little. Maybe, if he was careful…

He didn't see the kunai coming at him until Haro shoved him aside and it went flying past his head. He hit the ground with a thud, barely catching himself.

"I swear, Yukio, I am going to punch you in the mouth!" Haro bellowed

Itachi looked up, but had to turn his head to the left to see what Haro saw-that Yukio had pivoted from his place at the front of the group. He crouched, facing Itachi, one arm extended from where the kunai had left his fingers. His face was cloaked so that it was impossible to read his expression. Michiko and Jumei were several paces ahead. They had both stopped and turned. Michiko whispered to Jumei, who shook his head but said nothing.

Yukio straightened smoothly. "Your teammate has a blind spot," he said to Haro. He said it casually, as if pointing out that Itachi had a stain on his shirt.

"No shit!" Haro said. "I wonder *why* ? You do that again and I swear —"

"And he's distracted," Yukio interrupted. "A Shinobi with one eye and a sister held captive by his enemy can't afford to be distracted. He should have sensed that coming. I gave him plenty of time."

"There are other ways to point out that Itachi has a weakness," Amaya said coolly. "I think we are all aware of it. You don't need-"

"It's okay," Itachi said quickly, getting to his feet. He glanced at Amaya and Haro, communicating with his expression that it was okay for them to stand down. He still didn't care for Yukio, but he couldn't deny that Yukio was an ace Genin and he had agreed to help Itachi save Rina. That was all that mattered. Besides, Yukio did have a point.

A throwing knife appeared between Yukio's two fingers—Itachi could not say from where. "Fighting with a blind spot means having to rely more on everything else," Yukio said. "Stand against that tree." He pointed to a tree with a trunk only slightly wider than Itachi's body.

"We're supposed to be rounding up the Genin," Amaya said coolly.

"This will only take a minute," Yukio replied.

"You want to throw knives at me?" Itachi guessed.

"At the tree. You just keep still. And close your eyes."

"Yukio—" Amaya said worriedly.

"Don't worry," Yukio said. "I won't miss."

Itachi supposed that Yukio wouldn't, but it was still an effort to let the kid throw knives at him. His eye ached just thinking about it.

If I can't face Yukio, I have no business going on this mission.

So he moved to stand in front of the tree, muttering to Haro as he passed: "Watch him."

"You're nuts," Haro answered, crossing his arms.

Itachi turned at the tree, leaning his head against the trunk, and breathed deeply to calm himself.

I can't be afraid.

Yukio took a few steps back, measuring his paces. When he was almost in line with Michiko, he turned, taking a basic throwing stance with his right leg behind him, his weight poised on the ball of his right foot. Itachi had repeated that stance so many times in Academy training that it had become robotic but Yukio made it look fluid, like part of a dance. Itachi eyed the length of the throwing knife that Yukio held in a pinch grip, calculating that there was at least six full revolutions in the distance between them. Itachi closed his eyes.

Almost as soon as he shut them, he heard the knife whiz past his ear and *thunk* into the wood behind him. His right eye snapped open. He could see the handle of the blade by his right ear, centimeters from his head and sticking straight out of the wood. His heart was racing.

"Close your eyes!" Yukio said. "And don't move."

Itachi shut them. The second knife was almost silent. He didn't hear a thing until the *thunk* . He felt it almost sooner than he heard it.

"Concentrate with your *chakra* ," Yukio said. "Push out with it. You'll feel more around you."

Itachi tried to do that, feeling for his chakra, trying to get it to emanate around him.

A knife hit the wood by his left ear. He heard it. But he also sensed it. A little.

It's only a second , he thought. *If you can't* see *it coming, you have only an instant to react, but that's an instant you wouldn't have otherwise. I have to be sensing everything, all the time. I can't lose concentration.*

He let Yukio throw a dozen knives at him. He counted each one. He counted the duration between each one. He tried to anticipate. On the last one, he reached a hand out, and caught the blade by the handle.

"Nice," Yukio said.

Itachi opened his eyes. Yukio was leaning back on his heel, twirling an empty pouch in one hand. He had lowered his facial shroud and was smiling. Itachi was surprised. He looked to Amaya, to see if it wasn't some kind of joke.

"That was good," she confirmed. "Though he *might* have hit you."

"Not a chance," Yukio said. "I never miss."

Amaya rolled her eyes. Michiko giggled.

"It doesn't matter. I have to take risks," Itachi said. "I'll do whatever it takes. For Rina."

Yukio came forward and began removing his knives from the tree trunk. Itachi stepped away from it. The night air was starting to feel cold. Or maybe it was cold sweat. His shirt felt plastered to his skin.

"Why did your sister leave the village?" Haro asked him. "That was kind of a dumb thing to do. I thought you said she's smart."

"Rina is very clever," Itachi explained. "But the way she thinks is… She's very creative, and she's immature. She's been having a hard time. It's my fault really."

"How is it your fault?" Amaya said.

"I've always taken care of Rina," Itachi confessed. "Since she was old enough to crawl, she's followed me around. I've been the one to pack her meals and make sure she has the things she needs for school and walk her to where she's supposed to be. It was just something I did. Until I came here anyway." He closed his eyes. "I just… I've ignored her. But I can't… I can't lose her."

"You're both crazy," Yukio said, eyeing him askance as he pulled his knives out of the wood. "You and your sister—taking responsibility for what that has nothing to do with you. Your sister told me it was *her* fault you lost your eye. What bull! I washed your blood off my hands. And Rina's kidnapping is the fault of your enemies—the Grass and their employers—not you. She was upset, and she did something foolish, but I think if she had *actually* run away, and if she's as clever as you say, she would have calmed down, realized her mistake, and come right back. Little kids like her overreact all the time. The Grass manipulated her feelings, which you Uchiha seem to make pretty fucking easy, but it still isn't your fault. So shut up about it."

Itachi was silent. Yukio really did have a…bold way of expressing himself.

"And you're not going to lose her," Yukio added nonchalantly, yanking the last knife out of the tree. He spun the handle in his fingers and a moment later, the blade vanished up his sleeve. He turned. "We're going to get her back. The Grass can't stand against the Leaf. Not if we come in force. You just have to focus on your part. I'm going to endorse you, and the other Genin need to see someone who is focused. Not flailing. You can't be a liability." Yukio's gray eyes caught his. "Cool?"

Itachi didn't look away. "Where do we start?"

"The twins."

Yukio took the lead, heading west down the road. Itachi lengthened his strides to catch up, outpacing Michiko and Jumei and moving to the front to flank Yukio rather than trail behind him. To his surprise, Yukio dropped back to walk at his shoulder.

"Why the twins?" Itachi asked. He knew only vaguely who Yukio was talking about—a pair of girls with blue eyes and short black hair that he had seen a time or two among Yukio's admirers. They were a little older, having graduated from Academy a year ahead of his class.

"Because they can make perfect shadow clones," Yukio replied. "They specialize in information. They're logical thinkers and everyone respects their intel. We can ask them to help us spread the word."

The twins were out on their front porch when they approached, one sitting on the rail and the other in a chair by the door. They were perfect mirrors of each other, exactly the same down to the cross stitching on their black leather skirt flaps, smoky gray leggings, and silver eye liner.

"I need your help," Yukio said to them, leaning on the rail.

" *You* need *our* help?" one of the girls asked, sounding amused. "What *ever* can we do for you, Yukio?"

"My team is joining up with Itachi's team for a special mission—an A-rank mission."

The girls exchanged glances. "You're *working* with the outsider now?" the girl in the chair murmured.

"The one you blinded this afternoon?" her sister echoed.

"That's right. Turns out I was wrong. He's not an outsider. He's a dedicated Shinobi. And an Uchiha—I'm sure you've heard."

"Oh, we *saw* ," The sister on the rail said, and called to Itachi, "It was a very pretty Sharingan-"

"-That you destroyed," the one in the chair shot at Yukio. "Good match, though."

"Yeah," Yukio said, his tone absurdly casual. "Well, anyway, the Hokage has asked me to gather the Genin. You are all supposed to find your teachers and wait for instructions."

"Why?" the sister on the rail asked.

"A mission," Yukio said evasively, but looked at them both very seriously. "Involving all the Genin."

The sisters exchanged sharp glances. The question hung in the air without anyone saying it.

"We can round everyone up," the girl on the rail said. "Give us an hour."

"Half an hour," her sister countered. "I can do twice the clones my sister can."

Yukio grinned. "I knew I could count on you. Both of you."

They tossed him identical, coquettish smiles. Their eyes sparkled with amusement. One of them lifted her gaze to include Itachi.

"The Hokage asked *you* to gather the Genin," Amaya said to Yukio after they left the girls' porch. "Not to pass it off on the others."

"I *am* gathering the Genin," Yukio said, sounding puzzled. "The twins will carry the message, but it still comes from me. This is faster. What is the problem?"

Amaya just blinked. Itachi thought it was kind of funny. Amaya was the sort to always do everything herself. But Yukio's plan to delegate actually made more sense. It *was* faster.

"Some are going to be tougher to convince about Itachi, though," Yukio conceded, smiling at Amaya. "We'll hit those personally."

They approached the next house a little differently. It was the home of a member of the Aburame clan and apparently there were special rules for entering the premises due to the kikaichu. Itachi hung back as Yukio engaged a boy at the window that Itachi did not know. What he could see of the boy's body was almost completely covered in clothing and even his eyes were shielded by dark-tinted goggles, but he nodded as Yukio talked and finally turned to look in Itachi's direction.

When Yukio rejoined the group, he seemed pleased.

"We've got Bugs," Yukio informed them. "Incidentally, he thought you fought very well, Itachi. He's going to help spread the word."

House after house, they were welcomed with smiles or nods or exclamations. Some had already heard the news, but many seemed to want to hear it from Yukio himself. To Itachi, it was like Yukio had some sort of magical power, not jutsu, or anything related to chakra, but a kind of social brilliance. Yukio knew everyone and everyone knew him, but it was more than that. Even when he acted cocky as hell, which was often, everyone seemed to *like* him. He smiled and was confident, exuding an easiness and charm that even the shier Genin responded to. When Itachi was noticed *with* Yukio and after Yukio explained that they were on a mission together, no one objected; everybody just seemed to want to help. In little more than an hour, Itachi had made more allies than he could have contemplated making in a year on his own.

I wonder what would have happened if I had made more of an effort to be friends with Yukio when I arrived here, Itachi thought. He remembered being polite, but he could see now why politeness was lost on Yukio and why deference would have confused him. Yukio had high energy. He responded to strength, skill, and brilliance. He wanted to impress and be impressed. He had challenged Itachi straight off, insulting him to test him, and Itachi had focused on all of

Yukio's bad qualities—that he was vain, that he was arrogant, that he lacked culturing, and could be astonishingly rude. Yukio had probably sensed that and bristled.

We both just wanted to be acknowledged. Yukio really does have leadership skills . If I had recognized his talent and made friends with him, things might have gone really differently for me.

The moon was high by the time Yukio called a halt to their expedition. All the Genin had been reached. All the Jounin were in council with the Hokage. An anticipatory hush had fallen on the village. They were standing at the village crossroads, not far from the Academy.

It was quiet, so quiet that Itachi easily sensed it with his chakra—the shuriken headed for his left shoulder.

He moved instinctively, raising his arm to shield his body. The blades of the star bit harmlessly into the guard he wore on her forearm.

It wasn't thrown by Yukio, who was staring at the shuriken, looking as surprised as Itachi felt. It wasn't any of the other Genin either. Michiko was gaping and Jumei wore a quizzical expression. Amaya was searching the darkness, a kunai in her hand, poised for throwing, and Haro was peering the other way. There was no sign of an assailant anywhere.

"Not bad."

The voice came from somewhere above them.

Itachi looked up just as Shinobi dropped from the roof of a nearby shop onto the road in front of them. It was a jounin. Itachi could tell that immediately. He wore a green Konoha vest and the Konoha headband on his forehead, the plate pulled low over his left eye and the bottom half of his face covered by a blue mask. His hair was a shock of white above his head. He regarded their group with a lazy expression, gloved hands were shoved into the pockets of his pants.

"Kakashi Hatake," Amaya said, easing back on her heels and sheathing her kunai.

Itachi had no idea who that was, though the name sounded familiar. He tried to remember where he had heard it.

"You are so coolest ninja in Konoha," Yukio blurted. "Seriously."

"Thank you," Kakashi said, his one visible eye thinning as he smiled. "I've heard of you as well."

Yukio beamed.

Kakashi turned his smile on Itachi. "We haven't been properly introduced," he said. "I'm Kakashi Hatake. I taught Sakura, Sasuke, and Naruto when they were Genin."

Itachi blinked.

"I would have introduced myself sooner, but I've been away, exploring your home country."

Itachi felt a shock. "Really?"

"Hmm. Your house is really something."

Itachi flushed, remembering the gray stone mansion where he had grown up. It was so different from anything in Konoha, like another world all together, with its white marble floors and the curving grand staircase leading to an interior balcony. The entire estate was enclosed by a black iron gate and the grounds around it were expansive. His family's house wasn't the biggest house on the hill, but it had some of the best views. He tried to imagine Shinobi setting foot in the foyer, and just couldn't make the image stick.

I don't belong there either , he thought. *Not anymore.*

"There isn't much time," Kakashi said. "But moments can make a difference. I would like to train you in a few things. If you're ready."

He nodded at Itachi's injured eye.

"I could use the help," Itachi admitted. He had to restrain himself from reaching up to touch it. "Did you… did you lose an eye too?"

"Not exactly," Kakashi said. He lifted his Konoha headband. The left eye was a Sharingan.

Itachi just gaped, unable to express a thought or speak a word.

"I'm not an Uchiha," Kakashi told him. "This was given to me when I was around your age."

Itachi fumbled for a reaction. His thoughts were interrupted by the tolling of a bell.

Itachi tore his gaze away from Kakashi to look for the source. It was such a heavy gong, ringing deep and throaty and mournful, audible to every distant corner of the village. Itachi could feel it reverberate deep in his bones. His heart thumped in reciprocation.

"War," Amaya breathed. She stood tall and straight, her legs locked at the knee and her face turned toward the pale moon. "The Jounin have decided."

Kakashi nodded. "We have only a little time. But a little practice might be all you need."

Itachi looked back. His heartbeat quickened.

War…

"Won't it take *days* to get to the Grass?" Haro muttered.

"Not the way we are going to go," Kakashi told him. "The Hokage wants to engage the Grass tomorrow."

"We're being transported there?" Amaya gasped. "All of us?"

"The whole village—or enough Shinobi as to make it seem so to the Grass."

Even Yukio looked startled.

Itachi didn't quite understand, except to guess that the Hokage was going to use some jutsu that could move a group of people across vast distances swiftly. Tomorrow… His palms were sweaty, but he swallowed and nodded at Kakashi. "I'm ready," he said. "Show me."

The hand signs were completed too fast for Itachi to track. Kakashi crouched, lowering his palm to the earth, gripping his left wrist with his right hand. Pure lightning-based chakra blossomed in his fist, crackling with energy. The white-blue blaze threw back the darkness, flinging shadows to the far corners of the streets. The screaming calls of a thousand birds penetrated Itachi's ear drums.

All the Genin stepped back.

"I invented this jutsu," Kakashi told him, gazing up at him with that red Sharingan eye, tendrils of white lighting shooting up from his fist and obscuring parts of his face. "And I taught it to Sasuke when he was about your age. I've been told that you can make one. I will show you how to properly control it."

Itachi's heart beat hard in his chest.

I'm coming to save you, Rina.

#

Gehard coughed around his cigar, switching the pool stick from his left hand to his right as he walked down the length of the table. The smell of smoke hung heavy in the air. Underground, the ventilation was poor, adding to the sense of squalor.

The pool table he had had made from scratch. No one in this Grass Village seemed to know the game, so it was necessary to have to explain how the table should be made, but Gehard was no fucking carpenter. As a result, the dimensions weren't quite right, but it sufficed.

He wasn't alone in the room.

Rabar Lassen was watching him consider his shot from a padded stool in the corner, lifting a mug of frothy, cheap ale to his lips. He was a portly, odious man who didn't seem to realize how offensive his very presence was. Even his choice of spirits was offensive. The Houses tolerated him out of politeness, but everyone knew he was a pretender. His wealth came from a lucky break a few years back when a high-risk gamble that should have bankrupted him paid out expected returns. Most of the time, he didn't even seem to know what to do with it.

But the man had uses. Rabar had been the one to inform them where Lucia had fled. He had connections more odious than he was, and somehow he had known that she had come to the Land of Fire before, twelve years ago, to beget a child by a Shinobi assassin.

At least the first child.

Grimacing, Gehard took his shot. He succeeded in pocketing two balls, but it didn't ease his temper.

When he had thought Lucia merely an opportunist, he had been half ready to forgive her. But the fact that she had taken one of these physically mangled, bizarrely garbed, ill-bred, underworld assassins into her bed *repeatedly* , leading perhaps to not just one bastard child, but *two* . Rina…

"Fuck. If it's true, she'll be ruined," he muttered. "No one will want her."

"Lucia?" Rabar asked.

Gerhard eyed him askance. What an idiot.

"My daughter." He straightened, taking a deep drag on his cigar. Not his daughter, he had to correct himself. The bastard daughter of his whore of a wife. "Rina." Fuck.

It made him angry. Livid even. He was fond of Rina. Even as a baby, she had been a tiny, beautiful little thing, perfectly behaved, watching his every movement with those big dark eyes. As she got older, it became increasingly clear what a strange, but special little girl she was. And her music… Talent like hers was rare. She was a sensitive child, very gentle by nature, so he was always careful around her, more so than other people. He liked buying her pretty things—dresses, musical instruments, special paints. He hadn't ever wanted to contemplate the possibility that she might not be his. That Lucia had brought her to a place like this… potentially *conceived* her in a place like this… That she wasn't his…

"She won't be ruined," Rabar told him. "Just bring her home and don't tell anyone. Only those of us here know. The others would never guess."

Gehard ignored him. Two of the Higher Houses were represented here and they knew enough- more than enough. Secrets were more dangerous than weapons. They had proved that here, with the Grass.

Initially, when Gehard followed Lucia to these lands, he had hoped to deal with her on his own. He contracted with Grass Shinobi to gather information and discovered to his dismay that Lucia had taken herself and the children into the heart of a Shinobi village, and not just any village, but apparently one of the biggest and most famous.

The Higher Houses had not been pleased by his report, but they listened to his plan and they saw the opportunity. Lord Marix of House Almar and the Lady Romjin herself had come back with him. Instead of hiring Shinobi from the Grass village, they recruited loyalists, paying out large dividends under the table to the

disgruntled, the dispossessed, the criminally accused, and the desperate. It amazed Gehard how easily they did it. A whisper in the right hear, a suggestion of suspicion, and a large enough purse turned factions within the Grass against each other, resulting in the disintegration of the incumbent leadership and the establishment of a regime intent on serving the Houses to monetarily improve the village and settle into a rich, early retirement. For all intents and purposes, Houses Almar and Romjin were now the Lords of the Grass.

If Rabar Lassen thought they would keep the truth of Rina's origins a secret out of *kindness* , he truly was an idiot.

He should have outed Lucia long ago. He had always suspected her of infidelity—Itachi had *never* felt like his child—but had never been sure enough to accuse her and he had been largely content with their arrangement. Lucia had come to him a sudden bride—a nervous, sixteen year old girl from a family desperate to appease. She was not the virgin debutant he expected to wed—everyone knew she had been spoiled in her early teens—but she was beautiful, with a face and figure well-remarked upon. He had thought himself pretty lucky to have been chosen among her suitors, especially given the enormous wealth and prominence that came with marrying into a Higher House.

It was better than he imagined. His marriage to Lucia had every benefit, opening doors for him that had been shut before, enabling him to deal bigger and live larger than he had ever dreamed. He made sure she understood how to please him, and in exchange, he protected her from the ire of the other Houses. With the male line of her family extinguished and so much of her family's wealth unaccounted for, she was exposed. But Gehard was well-liked. When the engagement was announced, his compatriots in the Higher Houses congratulated him on the match. They told him to enjoy her, and as long as he kept her from making trouble, agreed to leave her alone.

He should have seen sooner that something was seriously off about her, though. She was compliant, always accommodating when he wanted her, but she was cold, and it annoyed him that he could never tell what she was really thinking or feeling. Even when he made a concerted effort to make love to her, he rarely elicited an honest reaction, which was strange to him since his other women found him irresistible. One night, when he had been drinking, he got so frustrated, he hit her. To his surprise, it worked. Like slapping a broken appliance. The rougher and crueler he was, the more it worked. After that, increasing roughness was the only thing that got any response from her at all. She even started to ask for it like that, sometimes to a point that was really beyond his level of taste.

He knew that something was wrong with her, but to seek out a Shinobi assassin for a lover? Just the thought made his skin prickle. What kind of crazy woman had he married?

A commotion outside interrupted his thoughts. The door opened, admitting a Grass Shinobi he recognized. The man's face was covered with a dark cloth mask and dark makeup matted the area around and his eyes. He was called Juo. Gehard knew little about the Shinobi arts, but apparently Juo was a fearsome Shinobi. He looked it.

"You've returned," Gehard observed, surprised. "Were our demands met? You were not to return unless-"

"The mission was a success."

The Shinobi slid to the side, exposing the doorway. Just behind where he had been, shrinking into the door frame…

Gehard dropped the pool stick.

"Rina!"

His little girl was terrified, shaking like a leaf. Gehard swooped in, hoisting her off her feet. Her arms came around his neck, clinging to

his shoulders, her body shaking. He held her close, kissing her hair, and then set her on the edge of the pool table so he could evaluate her more closely.

Her face and hands were covered with dirt and she was dressed like one of the little Shinobi urchins he saw running around the village. Did Lucia dress her that way? What was she thinking?

She wouldn't look him in the eye. She looked everywhere but at his face. He noticed that her teeth were clamped so tightly shut, a muscle in her jaw throbbed. She was still shaking.

"You're all right, Rina," he said to her in a soothing voice. "Listen to me, baby. Everything is fine. You are safe here. Your friends are here. We will all be going home soon."

She wouldn't reply. She would not look at him. She would not speak.

He wiped the dirt from her cheeks. The skin beneath was puffy and bruised, turning black and blue at the edges. Rina winced when he touched it.

Gehard rose suddenly, turning on Juo. "Did you hit her?"

"My orders were to bring her alive. She resisted. The damage is minimal."

"She is a little girl! How could her resistance-?"

The Shinobi's dark eyes caught and held his. Shinobi were like no paid servants Gehard had ever had before. They were not even like most mercenaries. They obeyed orders unflinchingly, but the way they interacted with their employers was unnerving. He didn't need to be reminded how dangerous they were. He was conscious of it all the time. Staying among them was like sleeping in a den full of rabid dogs. "The Leaf has been teaching her our arts."

Gehard was flummoxed. He looked at Rina, sitting like a doll at the edge of the pool table, her ankles crossed and shoulders slumped, her body huddled against itself. She still would not look in his direction. The last time he had seen her, she was wearing a dress suitable for high tea. Now he could see straps and pouches on her person for the concealment of weapons.

"Lucia," he growled. What had she done? Did she think this would help her? Protect her? The Houses would not stand for it. They would see it as all the more reason to—

Dread settled in the pit of his stomach, like he had swallowed a ball of lead.

"Have the others been informed?"

"Lady Romjin is at rest."

Lady Romjin of House Romjin was getting on in years but was as tough and leathery as an old stick. She rested often and refused to be disturbed for anything short of fire or war, and even then you had best knock quietly.

"Marnix?"

"Marnix Almar is…preoccupied."

It was impossible to tell from the man's cold, dark eyes how he felt, if he ever felt anything, but Gerhard suspected what he meant. Marnix Almar was enjoyable company at a card table, but had a sordid reputation where young women were concerned. Back home, he liked to pay poor men for the use of their daughters. It was a game to him. If they refused on principal, he found ways to cajole or threaten them into concession. Since arriving in these lands, though, Marnix talked of nothing but a desire to bed Kunoichi. Gehard thought it mad and warned him against it, especially in the village where they were staying, but Marnix seemed contemptuous of his concern. He seemed to find the very concept of Kunoichi fascinating, and bedding

one exciting, all the more so because of how easily she might kill him, if she were not under obligation *not* to, of course. It would not surprise Gehard if setting up such a scenario, or enjoying it if he had already done so, was his preoccupation now.

"Rabar," Gehard said. Lassen looked up, seeming surprised at being addressed. "Take Rina out of here. Have your wife clean her up. Put her with your son and the other children."

Rina turned her head to look at him them. Her eyes were twin pools, dark as night and shiny as mirrors. He could make nothing of her emotions. He couldn't tell what she was thinking. Just that it was something serious. Like she was considering something. Or plotting something. Just like Lucia.

In that moment, Gehard realized that he could not trust Rina. His hands tightened into fists.

"Inform the guards watching the children that she is Shinobi trained," he whispered to Juo. "Make sure she is secure, then find me with Marnix."

The Shinobi captain nodded. Gehard left them, making his way through the underground hallways. Much of this Grass Village was actually buried beneath the earth, rather like a rabbit warren. It was stifling, but some areas were more spacious than others, and Marnix had claimed the larger rooms—what used to be a war council room—for his personal quarters. Shinobi in the halls moved aside for him as he passed, shifting like shadows. There were no guards at Marnix's door, so Gehard entered. There was no point in knocking. A knock was certain to be dismissed.

As he pushed open the door, he was met by Marnix's cold, steely gray eyes. The man was reclining in an armchair in the corner, shirtless, a glass of some dark spirit in one hand. He was a powerful man, physically as well as materially, with a chest and shoulders like a bull, despite having a dozen or so years on Gehard. A gold chain with a locket hung around his neck—clearly a woman's necklace.

Gehard had heard stories that the locket belonged to a girl Marnix had once loved but had had murdered. The reason was strictly business, the rumor went. Marnix never took it off. Gehard wasn't sure if the story was true, but he knew that the sentiment was.

It took Gehard a moment to notice the Kunoichi, as she was kneeling at Marnix's feet, but she rose when he entered. She looked to be all of fourteen years old, maybe fifteen, with big eyes, long bare legs, and short dark hair that barely graced her neck. She was dressed, so it was unclear how far things had gone. Gehard wondered what leverage Marnix had over this one.

He doubted it was just money. Shinobi were quick to take any mission, but despite having heard stories of seduction and murder, prostitution was not among their services. At least, not directly. It was possible that Marnix had paid someone that controlled the girl. He might even have disguised it as a mission—paying her superiors to tell her that the mission was to "stay close" and "gather intel" or some other garbage. That would be like Marnix. He liked the ones that *didn't* want him. If an order was insufficient, he might tempt her with some outrageous sum or the promise of escape. Maybe he had a hostage to use against her, or a secret to blackmail her with. If he didn't have what he needed, he would create it. That was the game.

"You are interrupting," Marnix told him in a voice as cold as his eyes.

"Rina is here," Gehard informed him.

Marnix Almar did not respond immediately. He glanced at the Kunoichi, dismissing her with a look. She quickly gathered her things, not meeting Gehard's eyes as she ducked passed him and out of the room.

"And her mother?" Marnix asked when the girl was gone.

"Lucia will deal."

"You sound confident about that."

"She loves her children. She will come to the table."

"You understand that we shouldn't be in the position of *having* to deal," Marnix reminded him. "You were supposed to keep her under control."

"I had her under control," Gehard protested.

"You should have put her on her knees."

"I put her on her knees often enough."

Marnix smirked at him, amused by his comment, since it was not what he meant. He swirled his glass and rose from the chair. "I don't intend to deal, Gehard. I have gone along with this plan of yours, but now that it comes to it, I wonder if you are truly committed."

"I am committed. The Berculo House has always been committed."

"And yet you intend to *deal* ."

Gehard thought quickly. He had to be careful how he phrased this.

"I had wanted to take Rina home with me," he said. It was difficult to keep bitterness from his voice. "But it seems increasingly plausible that she is not mine. Lucia even has her learning Shinobi arts. I don't think I can make anything of her. So… perhaps we *can* deal."

Marnix grunted. "The Van Alstyne inheritance legally passes to the children of Lucia's body. Nothing is written about legitimacy. Peculiar phrasing, but there it is. We cannot relinquish the girl."

"Not even if Lucia voluntarily disinherits the children?"

That had been his plan.

But Marnix only smirked at him again. "You really think she will?"

Gehard saw where this was going.

They are just children.

"You can force her into it," he said. "If you convince her that the only other alternative—"

"Even if she does disinherit her bastards, will they accept it? " Marnix interrupted him. "The boy especially? He has the better claim, but after Lucia, I am not so complacent about girls anymore. We have tried intimidation and it has failed. The last thing we need is another maddened Val Alstyne out for revenge." He took a swallow of his drink. "I think you know what has to happen here, Gerhard. I ask you again: are you committed?"

"You want to have them both killed," he said quietly.

Marnix's eyes were cold. "It is not a want."

Gehard was silent, staring at that gold chain and locket around Marnix's neck. He had just told Rina she was safe, that she could go home. All at once, he was angry. This was Lucia's fault. She had never understood. She had always thought herself too high. She had brought this on all of them.

"They are not *your* children, Gehard. You can't pass anything on to them. It can be done painlessly, if you are concerned about that."

"I just…" He didn't want this. He just wanted to go back home to his real life and forget any of this ever happened. He wanted out of this mess. He had never wanted to come here in the first place. But he had no choice in the matter. He was responsible for Lucia, and he needed her. He just didn't think retrieving her would require him to have to kill children. He didn't want to kill children, especially children he had raised, not even Itachi, for whom he felt no particular affection. And Rina… Painless? There was nothing painless about that.

But what he said was: "The boy will be hard to get to. He is still with the Leaf."

"I have an entire village of assassins at my disposal. We will move forward with your plan. Let Lucia come to the table. Let her *think* she is dealing. We will dangle Rina before her, and these Leaf Shinobi, if she brings any to bear. In the meantime, if we can kidnap one child from the Leaf, we can have another killed. In theory, it should be easier."

"Won't that upset the Leaf village?"

"We might have to settle with them on it. I am not opposed to that. From what we've seen, though, losing children is part of the Shinobi lifestyle. If they are training them as you say, then they are not charged with protecting them, so we will not have to compensate them for that loss. As for Lucia, knowing her as I do, I don't think they will be sorry to be rid of her. It is the cleanest solution really, with benefits to all parties."

Gehard said nothing. He was trying to think of an alternative, some other way that matters could resolve. If he could just convince Lucia to kneel… But he could see that Marnix was through being patient with Lucia and that her kneeling wouldn't signify anything. She had knelt before Gehard willingly for thirteen years and this was where they were now. What could he do? The Higher Houses were too powerful to defy. His friendliness with them did not protect him that far. If he was obstinate, they would just dispose of him, and with less consideration than they gave killing bastard children.

When Juo appeared, Marnix addressed him as if he had been the one to summon him. "I need you to find your best people," he said, beckoning the Shinobi captain through the door. "As many as are willing to do an unpleasant task. I will reward you handsomely."

"What is the mission?"

"I need Itachi Van Alstyne killed."

Juo was silent for a moment. "It will be more trouble with the Leaf," he said.

"I will make it worth the trouble," Marnix said. "Can you find Shinobi or not?"

"I can find Shinobi."

"Then have your Shinobi target him. Wherever he is. Tomorrow."

Juo hesitated in the doorway.

Marnix gestured for him to speak.

"The boy has a Sharingan," Juo said. "It would be of little value to you, but very valuable to Shinobi."

A Sharingan? Gehard had no idea what that was. Some kind of object? A weapon?

"The one who kills him may keep any spoils," Marnix answered.

TBC

THANK YOU FOR REVIEWS SINCE LAST CHAPTER:

Oxybusy, La Nuit Noire, santh13, KnightWolfe, animekingmike, SasuSaku means Love, PastaSentient, Zero-Divide, reality deviant, Panbuukin, anon, ElectricSugarPop, Darth Malleus, ijpowers92, Albatross Aoba, Nitramy, Eggbert 3000, The Real Iggy, shadow8691, BukkakeNoJutsu, the TumTum tree, .261, SectumSemprae, Kendroid, tarrisse, Hijokugei, kikyostar1, oxcilvermoonxo, anAutumnLady, SilenT-CHimE, Blue Aidelle, Anime369, dongaro, Solvdrage, KatMaxKu, Michael Kirk, strangebloke, hymnia, 00-night-eyes-00, ScreenSurfer, Xer, kuromimi, S. 1231, Zankaru Zelladonii, DamionKenley117, SASSafrasEND, angrypixels, Bisepadi, oh no I wont, Joy-Girl, Your-Room-Is-A-Mess, Xoroth, yumenomiko, Yoholic, GoldenRat, Unintentional Liar, niki-the-polkadot, shkh4ever, hissori_yoru, Nokito-chan, Jason, Arem617, Melodi Moon, Lucifionne, FiendFluyd, karinruyshka, Arynia, BladeofRays, Rin-

elwin, 3.31.09, exotic lady, Erin Kamikaze, jessanotherkid, Ekun-Asha, weeksauce, ChewyShus, redspud, Everdawn, authority02, Anime369, Kvinnor, Delbi18, HotAirBaloon, Nitramy (again), O1Trycia-chan01, Less Wong (even though you didn't get past chapter 2 as far as I know), zackuberberdcondon, MikotoUchiha, Silent Strikes, AllePaula, LaterThanSunrise, .

Special kudos to Nitramy for putting this story on TV Tropes and promoting it in forums. You're the best!

Please review again! It is so nice to see new names as well as old, returning ones! You have no idea how happy it makes a writer to get feedback on their work!

This chapter I feel like there are a lot of emotional/relational developments… plus setting up the upcoming battle scenes / conflict. Please share any thoughts you have on any of the following!

Scene 1:

War Council - what do you think of the plan / Naruto being Naruto

SasuSaku - so much here...

Scene 2:

Lucia's dream (what are your thoughts on ItaLucia)

Scene 3:

Itachi/Yukio - rounding up the Genin

Kakashi introduces himself to Itachi (finally, right?)

Scene 4:

Gehard/Lucia from alt POV

The Grass

The Higher Houses

I'm waiting on pins and needles for your thoughts

Chapter 22

My reviewers are the smartest in the world. Truly, you guys leave such amazing comments. Sorry this chapter took so long to complete. I worked a bit on the ItaLu back story (which maybe I'll publish…I'm not sure) and I also worked out the story of the Grass, which took some time.

More importantly, I've been working on an original novel. Fanfic is fun but a bit of a distraction from the goal of being a published author, so I've been working on a plotline for something original, and I'm entering NaNoWriMo to write it...starting after I publish this. Just giving you a head's up. I'm not abandoning White Rain.

White Rain

Chapter 22

By Zapenstap

Torchlight flickered around Juo, lighting his way through the tunnels as he descended deep into the Grass's underground. He was surrounded side to side, overhead, and underfoot by hard-packed dirt and stone. Torches were placed evenly along the left-hand wall, casting a ruddy glow and moving shadows on the opposite wall. He did not really need the light. He could find his way through the catacombs in pitch darkness, as all Grass Shinobi could, but it was the duty of the Genin to keep the way lit, and he would never inhibit duty.

"Juo…?"

His name was breathed in a trepid whisper, confidence wavering like the flicker of a candle flame. He turned his head to see who spoke to a Jounin of his reputation with such temerity.

She was crouched on the ground, her wrists hanging limply over her knees. Her short dark hair was disheveled. Her vest—the color of grass in summer—was unlaced, revealing a mud-colored mesh shirt beneath it. Tan boots covered her legs from toe to knee, but the tops of her knees were dusty and bruised.

Last he saw her, she was leaving Marnix's chambers in the same state of half undress. It sickened him to see her.

"Juo—"

"Don't say anything, Kaia."

The walls are always listening.

She ignored his warning, lifting her face from her knees as he approached. "Don't make me go back," she croaked from the ground. "There is something *wrong* with that man, Juo."

"No one is making you do anything," he told her. It sounded harsh. He meant it to. "Don't complain of wrongness. Don't complain at all. You are Kunoichi."

"What does that mean?" Tears welled up in her eyes—angry tears. She scrubbed them into her cheeks with the heel of her hand. "I thought I knew. I used to know. But I... I don't know why they asked me to *do* this. I-"

"Then don't."

She pulled her hand away from her face. Her skin was pallid. "Shirk a mission? I can't. You *know* what the council will do."

Juo said nothing. He knew.

She turned her big blue eyes on him. "If I refuse, if I run, they will replace me with my sister. She is not yet twelve. Just a Genin. *Please* , Juo."

He said nothing, regarding Kaia in silence. Kaia's sister… Saiya. He remembered a skinny girl with dirty blonde hair, hazel eyes, and a fierce, stubborn nature.

"Is this the Grass you want to serve?" Kaia demanded when he did not speak. Her blue eyes were tearing. "What he wants me to do is *filthy* , Juo. I don't see the value of it. It's not like he *tells* me anything. Whether he's cut a deal with the feudal lord, what he intends for the Grass… I don't know! And I feel like…" she swallowed, unable to say it.

I feel like a whore.

"Please. You have influence with this new council. If you care for me at all-"

"No," Juo told her.

She moved all at once. In the time it took him to draw a single breath, Kaia had pushed herself up and off the wall and darted in front of him, spreading her feet wide across the corridor to block his way so he would have to face her. Her features were screwed tight. She was trembling, though whether with rage or fear or something else was difficult to tell.

"I don't believe you!" she cried. "You taught me my first jutsu, Juo. You *taught* me. Don't you remember?"

He did. He should have taught her how to hide her feelings better.

Nothing showed on his own face. "I cannot help you, Kaia."

"If you *knew* the things he wants me to do-."

He shoved her to the side.

"Juo!"

He brushed past her.

"JUO!"

Her cry followed him down the corridor, ringing in his ears. He ignored it.

Juo knew exactly what Marnix wanted from Kaia. The man had not bothered to hide his desires or intentions. But it was the Grass leaders who were to blame. They had assented. They had chosen Kaia from amongst the Kunoichi on purpose, knowing she would obey. Kaia was young, slender, with soft skin, smooth cheeks, and big, trusting blue eyes. How Marnix had smiled when the council presented her to him…

I really should have taught her to hide her feelings.

Kaia was not a child, not by Shinobi standards. She had been raised to Chuunin some time ago. She had killed in battle. She was his student no longer and should not have to come to him for help. She should not *need* help. Kunoichi these days were just not what he remembered. Was it just Kaia? The Grass? All Shinobi?

The world has changed.

The Grass had never been as strong as the hidden villages beholden to the five great nations—Cloud, Rock, Mist, Sand, Leaf—but they had had their niche. Lacking the brute strength of their neighbors, their Shinobi way was cunning and evasive, like the labyrinth in which they lived. How else was such a little nation between such mighty neighbors supposed to endure? Grass Shinobi liked to claim a certain type of toughness, the kind that came from always living on the brink of survival.

We are rabbits , Juo thought. *Rabbits surrounded by wolves* .

The Grass boasted that they had developed the arts of subterfuge more than any other ninja village. But that was back when the other ninja villages had been at each other's throats and it was easy to play one against the other. Now the great nations were all friends.

Trapped between Earth and Fire, their small country was being squeezed.

The Grass Village will die…is dying… He knew it surely. He'd been watching it happen for years.

Peace was a plague.

It was a problem in every Shinobi village, he knew, but because of how small they were, the Grass felt it sharper and swifter than the others. The larger villages, with their fierce Shinobi and bold reputations, took the missions that used to come to them, leaving only crumbs.

Years ago, when the problem was first noted, the Grass leaders—the old Grass leaders—assured the village that all would be well. They had income enough from the Daimyo and their other sponsors, they said, to support the village through a rough patch of low missions. Still, as a precaution, they ordered the clans to winnow down their Shinobi members, forcing their less promising sons and daughters to learn other crafts.

But as time passed, it became clear that there was no rough patch. The world had changed, and it was not changing back. Missions continued to decrease, and then their sponsors began backing out, first in a trickle; then in a flood. The shortage in funds came sudden and it came sharp. There came a day when Juo requested his monthly due only to be turned away. From that day on, Shinobi were paid only for actual missions—the days of bench time were over.

Discontent in the village surged. How could their sponsors abandon them? Why wasn't the Feudal Lord doing anything? Why did you assign so-and-so to a mission and not me? Grass Shinobi realized that they were being pitted against one another. Clans became reclusive. Insults were tossed between Shinobi clans that had missions and those that did not. When the flow of missions dried up to a trickle, insults turned to blows, until Grass Shinobi fought in the streets for assignments like dogs for scraps of meat.

The Grass Leaders promised a resolution, but they hadn't the resources to deliver on that promise.

Shinobi began to desert. Skilled Grass Jounin turned rogue, offering their services directly to clients, further strangling the village. There were also Shinobi that turned criminal. Although incidents were difficult to pin on Shinobi definitively, reports came of ninja looting, mugging, and even murdering civilians in the countryside. The Grass leaders grew fearful, not only for the loss of life and a tarnished reputation, but fearful that other Shinobi villages would attack.

Juo watched it all uneasily.

He was not surprised when the Grass leaders sent Hunter Nin after the rogues with orders to bring them back…dead or alive. He was one of them. The crackdown was brutal. For a time, broken or dead Shinobi reminded those that remained that desertion had its price. The leaders took no pleasure in it, but urged the clans to remember the sanctity of the village—that without it, they would be mercenaries fighting for survival, with the stronger devouring the weaker. Publically, no one balked, but within the clans, rebellion was brewing, especially among Jounin who felt that they were "stronger".

Into such a Grass walked the foreigner Gehard Berculo.

It was obvious from the start that he knew little of Shinobi ways. But what did that matter? He had a job for them—the whole village—and a ludicrous amount of money to pay for it.

Gehard's request seemed simple enough. His wife had run away from home, he claimed, taking his children with her. He cited a forced marriage, a death in the family, and a string of affairs, all leading to a strained home life. He actually seemed worried about her, and even more so about his daughter. His wife was somewhere in these lands, he said; did the Grass have experts trackers capable of finding her?

He was willing to pay three times what a search-and-retrieve service would normally cost. And he would hire every Shinobi who could be put to the task. He seemed to think very little of it. He assured them too that he was well-connected—a member of a large, extremely wealthy network of rich families who might have need of Shinobi…if their services could be proven useful.

This man has more wealth to spend on Shinobi than our Feudal Lord , the Grass leaders quickly ascertained.

Grass Shinobi were dispatched at once to find Berculo's wife.

And find her they did.

Lucia Berculo, maiden name Van Alstyne, was the guest of the Hokage, safely under the protection of the Village Hidden in the Leaves. Her son was the bastard child of the infamous Uchiha Itachi. The Leaf had made him a Genin. The daughter, Rina, was an Academy student.

The news rocked the entire Grass village. Delivering this woman to Gehard was supposed to be their golden ticket, the first in a string of new business, they hoped, not just with Gehard, but with the mysterious "others" he claimed to represent. But how were they to get to her? The Leaf was impenetrable, the Hokage was possibly the most respected Shinobi alive, and no one wanted to rile Sasuke Uchiha, who was known everywhere to be rash, vindictive, extremely dangerous, and understandably touchy about his clan.

But by that point we were in too deep , Juo thought as he took a torch from a sconce on the wall and took the stairs down…deep deep down…to the depths of the village catacombs. *We needed these rich men more than they needed us.* The leaders knew that if the Grass did not find a way to complete the mission, Gehard would simply take his wealth to another village.

So they reported on Lucia's whereabouts and explained the situation, assuring the client of their loyalty, but that they needed

leverage to draw this woman out of the Leaf. Gehard seemed to understand. He returned to his lands, leaving his companions in their care: two men, a woman, and a child—members of families beholden to him by debts owed or demanded. When he returned, he brought more people-an old woman, a man with hard, cold eyes, and four children. The man and woman were Marnix Almar and Lady Romjin, prominent members of what they soon learned were called the Higher Houses, families with more wealth even than Gehard.

Juo didn't like any of them, but he rarely liked clients. He didn't have to like them. He was Shinobi. His duty was to obey, complete his missions, and serve the village. So he kept his mouth shut.

The children, four in all, not including the son of one of the families that originally came with Gehard, turned out to be some kind of musical performing group. But Juo never heard them sing. It was clear that they were not there to perform for anyone. They were bait.

This is serious , Juo realized. *This missing Lucia woman… there is more to this than a runaway wife.*

The clans began to argue, calmly at first, but repeatedly, with increasingly frequency and passion.

And then, with tempers hot, fighting broke out.

It happened so fast—too fast to be considered rash or unplanned. The Grass Leaders were pulled down. A group of Jounin, seven in all, elected themselves to a council—the same Jounin who had entertained ideas of turning rogue before Gehard's arrival. Juo knew them well. They were strong fighters, every one, but not the types to lead. It became obvious that they had struck a deal with Marnix Almar. It was Marnix who told them what to do. It was Marnix who ruled the village now.

So where does that leave me? Juo was left wondering. *Who do I serve?*

The Grass. Always the Grass. But what Grass? The former Grass? The immediate Grass?

The Grass is the Grass , he thought, *and duty is clear, even if the rest is chaos* .

He thought on it long and hard. He thought about what it meant to be Shinobi, about what it meant to be Grass, about the state of the Grass village, about what the village needed most. He thought and thought until he had no choice but to resign himself to a particular course of action. He emerged from contemplation to volunteer himself to lead the mission to kidnap the little Academy girl.

The council approved, of course. Juo was of the old way, an old world. The whole village knew him… and his worth. He was a known killer, ferocious, cold, and violent, but loyal. His hands had been soiled long before now, even with the blood of children, even with the blood of former comrades, all for the sake of the village. He was an obvious choice.

But a Shinobi is the shadow , he thought *. Quick, subtle, elusive… motion cloaked in darkness.*

Nothing was ever quite what it seemed.

At the bottom of the steps there was a door. With the light of the torch, he could make out the frame of it—a heavy cast-iron box carved with shapes…ancient seals to block out whispers. It was a war room, used for secret councils. Without knocking, he pushed the door open.

Three ninja awaited him within, sitting around a rough wooden table in a ruddy light, their faces lacking expression. Two were male. One was female. Even without expression, he knew what they were thinking. He knew these three better than he knew himself. There was a reason he had taken them with him to the Leaf.

"We have a job," he told them.

Their faces did not change.

"Assassination of the Uchiha child," he told them. "Lucia Berculo's son."

As expected.

Chihara's eyes held steady to his. She was a large woman, capable of wielding the great fan she wore strapped to her back. With it, in conjunction with a unique kekkai genkai, she could transport herself, as well as her companions, across great distances.

Tadashi, a weapons expert, leaned back in his chair and crossed his thick arms. He was a brute, built like an ox, as wide as he was tall. The numerous weapons he carried were as fearsome as they were unnecessary. He favored the kusarigama—chain sickle—but it was said he could crush a man's skull with one bare hand.

Beside Chihara, Kuro—slim as a reed and deadly fast—stirred. He carried no weapons. He did not need them. The pupils of his eyes were pitch black and eerily large—almost obscuring the whites of his eyes.

"The Leaf will not abide it," Kuro murmured. "The Hokage certainly will not. And Sasuke Uchiha…" Kuro left it hanging, saying nothing more. But he didn't need to. Tadashi grunted.

Sasuke Uchiha. Juo thought. While in the Leaf, Juo had observed Sasuke for himself. The last remaining Uchiha maintained a cool and aloof detachment to the black-eyed child that carried his dead brother's infamous name and face, despite training him for that Genin bout. He did not think the detachment was feigned. And if the boy meant little to him, the girl must mean less. *Still, who knows what will rouse him. The death of a child might, even if the life of a child did not. I would not wish to tangle with that one.*

He did not wish. But that was not the question. A mission was to be accepted or not.

"Who do you serve?" Juo asked the others.

"The Grass," they replied, all three of them.

The answer was enough.

Sasuke vaulted the steps to his porch and pushed open his front door with such force that the wood banged against the wall and rebounded, creaking on its hinges. He stopped, standing just before the threshold, confronted by the blackness, and the silence, of his empty home.

No one lives here anymore. Sakura is gone.

Just him… if anyone could call what he did "living."

He stepped into the gloom and shut the door, blocking out the silver light of moon and stars. It was still a few hours before the dawn. Within his home, with the window coverings pulled tightly shut, he couldn't see anything. He stood for a moment in the middle of nothing, absorbing the darkness.

His heartbeat was the only sound. It thumped loudly in his ears.

The plans are set , he thought. *We leave within the hour.*

The Jounin were organizing, so why was he so anxious? The Grass had had Rina only a short time. Not even enough time to write a letter to Konoha demanding ransom. Naruto would get Sasuke there before the Grass had time to digest the success of their operation. Rina would be rescued. He would rescue her himself, kill anyone who tried to stop him, bring her safely back to Konoha. And then… and then…

Then what?

The thought made him tremble.

Then what? Then what?

He stood in pitch blackness, but in his mind's eye he could see the tears in Sakura's green eyes plain as day, like drops of dew. He had chosen his brother's ghost over her, his brother's family over his own family, and she must leave the village because of it.

I knew that I shouldn't have kids—

But what excuse was that? Sakura was bringing his child into the world. It was as Naruto said. Ready or not, in a matter of months, he would be a father. But Sakura meant to take his child away, to spare his progeny the pain of Sasuke's apathy.

Just the thought made his stomach cramp, but what was he to *do* ?

Stop her. Tell her I'll try. Tell her… Tell her what? "Try" wasn't good enough and he knew it.

How had his brother, whose pain had to have been *worse* than his own, found it within himself to father *two* children?

Itachi again.

Every thought he had always came to Itachi!

Frustrated, he dropped his head into his hands, digging his fingers into his scalp, screaming silently inside his skull. He knew what he was *supposed* to do.

There was just *so much* pain, an ocean of pain. The loss within him —his parents, his brother, his clan—It was a crater with no bottom. He had always known what he was *supposed* to do. He knew what everyone wanted, what Naruto and Sakura particularly wanted, had wanted for years. They wanted him to heal. They wanted him to shrug off the loss and begin anew. They want him to *move on* . He pretended for their sake. He pretended that it was possible. But he knew deep down in his bones that there was no shrugging off how

he felt. Time did not make a dent in it. Decades could pass and it would not dull the edge. A lifetime would not be enough. And no one understood. Maybe if they understood, *really* understood, it would help. A little. But to make them understand would be to hurt them as he had been hurt. He could think of no other way to make someone feel what he felt.

Pain is the only universal communicator. Even Ibiki said so. Is that why I do nothing but hurt everyone around me? Is that the only way I know how to communicate?

He had vilified Lucia, ignored Rina, pushed Itachi away... And Sakura…Sakura he hurt most of all. They all suffered because of him. Him and his sadness and his silence. Itachi had lost a Sharingan eye because Sasuke had been loath to train him properly…to believe in him. And now the boy was going into battle.

I failed my brother's family too.

The thought was so overwhelming, he almost couldn't breathe.

No.

He began to move about the house, as quick and silent as the shadows that engulfed the world around him.

Enough of this, he thought. *There has to be an end to it. I am sick of it. I am sick of myself. I am sick to death of myself.*

His weapons…where were his weapons? The katana he had been wearing, but he adjusted it so that the blade rested across his back, the handle sticking up over his shoulder, freeing his hands and legs for movement. He found his arm guards folded up in a drawer at the bottom of the dresser. He filled his pouches with kunai and shuriken. His mission supplies, the emergency packs all Shinobi carried out into the field, were dusty from lack of use.

Has it been so long?

Rooting around in the dresser drawer, his hand found a strip of cloth, a few feet in length. The moment he touched it, he knew exactly what it was. A bandana.

He lifted it from the drawer. It was soft to the touch, the material sliding easily across the skin. His fingers caressed the white and red Uchiha fan embroidered on the cloth…

Itachi's lungs burned. His lips were dry and cracked. It hurt to swallow.

His arm trembled with lightning infused chakra. He formed the hand signs as instructed…slowly.

"Good," Kakashi murmured, watching him from ten feet away, his Sharingan eye trained on Itachi's hands.

The other Genin were crowded on the side of the side of the street, sitting or leaning against the stone wall that wrapped around a residential yard, though Michiko had climbed up the side like a squirrel and now sat on top of it. They were all watching, none of them making a sound. Yukio's eyes shone in the light of the moon like two polished stones, his attention rapt on the training.

Itachi brought the tips of his index and middle fingers together.

"Don't overdo it," Kakashi reminded him. "Lighting requires a feather touch. Just enough to spark."

Itachi nodded, not speaking. The difficulty magnified on the last sign. He turned his palm up, the way Kakashi had showed him, and brought his other hand, the one infused with the lighting, to his wrist.

The jolt sent him up on his toes. He legs trembled with the power of it. His instinct was to tighten his fist, because the energy felt so out of his control, but Kakashi had taught him not to do that. Hold it like a bird, he instructed. Give it room to breathe. The circuit needs to flow.

So he held the energy lightly, concentrating. The lightning caught, sparkling fitfully at first, and then blazing a deep, brilliant blue. Tendrils of blue-white lightning warped around his palm in a tangled web of color and sound. He maintained it for a few seconds, and then slowly turned his palm over, closing his fingers into a fist. The Chidori sounded like a fistful of firecrackers going off in his hand all at once. It was difficult not to be a little afraid of it.

But it can't hurt me , he reminded himself. *Not if I don't lose concentration.*

"Wow!" he heard Michiko exclaim.

"Release," Kakashi instructed.

Itachi looked up in surprise. "But—"

"Before it drains you."

He let go. The blue-white light radiating from his fist fanned out, the tendrils whipping out of his grasp, but the crackle went out of them instantly. It was just light. When that went out too, all was darkness again.

Kakashi's voice floated to him through the shadows. "You're doing well."

"I…thanks," Itachi stammered. His muscles were trembling, his knees felt like butter, and his throat was still parched. "I think I need to rest. How long do we have before…?"

He wasn't sure what to call it. Before they deployed? Before battle? Before he might have to kill someone?

Before I can save Rina , he reminded himself.

"Not long," Kakashi answered. "Long enough for a little rest, since we aren't the first team out. How are you feeling?"

Itachi wondered about that. How *was* he feeling? Physically, he was tired. He felt like he had just run five miles, but he could recover. He just needed a break. Emotionally…

"I don't know."

That was the only answer he had. Kakashi didn't press him. He didn't say anything at all. But that Sharingan eye was watching him closely.

Itachi wondered what this man—this famous Shinobi—thought of him. They had just met, but Kakashi knew his uncle, had been Sasuke's teacher, and Sakura and the Hokage's too. He must know quite a lot about the Uchiha, about Itachi's family…

"Did you know my father?" he blurted.

Kakashi cocked his head slightly, but with that mask obscuring his face, Itachi couldn't gauge his reaction.

"We met," Kakashi said. His tone was casual. "I fought him a few times."

Itachi had had this conversation before, with Naruto. It still made him feel weird, even now that he was more acquainted with the ninja world. He wasn't sure how to respond. "Oh." He paused, flummoxed. "Do you know about…?" He stopped, unsure what he was allowed to say about his father's secrets. It was all a big mess in his head. He was conscious too of the other Genin watching in the dark. Confused, he trailed off.

Kakashi looked back at Itachi, his Sharingan eye training on him in the darkness. "I know enough," Kakashi said softly, but the way he was looking at him…

He knows.

Kakashi continued. "But I didn't know about you. Or your mother."

Itachi swallowed. "Right." No one did. "So…" He licked his lips. "What was he like? My father." He flushed. He had asked his mother, who always answered with evasion. He had asked his uncle, only to be rebuffed. He never knew how to ask it right.

But Kakashi didn't even blink. "Hmm. Let me think." There was only a short pause as Kakashi's eyes rolled up to the sky, drinking in the starlight. "I would say that he had a deeply defined sense of himself," Kakashi said. "He knew what mattered to him and never wavered from it. But he rarely showed expression. It was difficult to deduce his weaknesses or throw him off balance."

Itachi absorbed that slowly.

Kakashi continued. "He was a skilled strategist and tactician, able to both formulate plans and absorb new information to adapt those plans as situations changed. Not much escaped his notice. In combat, he could be ruthless, but he was also precise to a fault, never wasteful."

"You know all this from fighting him?"

Kakashi smiled again. "You learn a lot about a man when you fight him, and about yourself too, especially if you lose. I had the unique experience of being tortured by Itachi Uchiha."

Itachi's mind went blank. "T…tortured?"

He could feel the other Genin watching. Could they hear? Did they know this? His head was spinning.

"The Tsukuyomi. It was a specialty of your father's. He could lock a man in a dream world of his making, outside of space and time. In such a place, he could torture his opponent for days, even kill him over and over, all in the space of a second. He did it to me. The result left me bed-ridden for days, though I had no physical wounds."

"That…" Itachi choked, horrified.

"Allowed me to live," Kakashi told him. "Your father took me out of a fight without killing me or anybody else involved. Impressive actually. And generous, since use the Tsukuyomi does damage to the Sharingan. Few Shinobi of his skill would have been so kind."

Itachi thought about that statement for a few moments, the *strangeness* of it…

Since discovering his father's existence, he had wanted to know more about him, had wanted to identify with his character, to find something to love about him, he supposed. Now he knew more than he wanted. He knew that his father had been ordered by Konoha to kill everyone he loved, that he had done it, and had been isolated and betrayed. Now Kakashi was telling him that he had been a torturer. Had tortured him. For days. And this was *kindness* ?

"Itachi Uchiha was an exemplary Shinobi," Kakahi told him. "And an excellent spy, I'm sure I don't have to tell you. Few Shinobi have carried the burdens he did with such extreme secrecy and care."

Itachi nodded, a little jerkily, trying to absorb it.

This ninja world was so confusing.

"Itachi."

He was so disoriented, it took him a moment to realize he was being addressed, and not by Kakashi or any of the Genin.

But he knew that voice.

Sasuke.

Itachi turned to see his uncle emerge from the shadows. Kakashi saw him too. He stepped back, watching with his arms crossed. Sasuke didn't look at his former teacher at all. He was holding something in his hands. It was a dark-colored cloth, folded so that Itachi couldn't tell what it was.

"Did you…did you hear?" Itachi stammered. "Just now, I mean? I'm sorry. I thought—"

Sasuke's gaze caught and held his. "Take off your headband."

Itachi's hand sprung instinctively up to his forehead protector. "What? Why?"

"Just take it off."

Staring at his uncle's face, at the solemnity he saw etched there, Itachi complied, slowly reaching behind his head to loosen the knot and let the metal plate fall around his neck.

Sasuke approached him silently, unfurling whatever he held in his hands as he got closer. When he was within arm's length, Itachi glimpsed what was on the cloth, just before Sasuke lifted it out of his sight. A jolt went through them.

"No," he objected, almost choking on the word as Sasuke carefully wrapped the bandana around his head, covering the left side of his face and his damaged eye. The material felt cool against his skin. Sasuke lifted the Konoha headband over it. The cloth hung low on the left, covering his wounded eye. It would be clearly visible to anyone he came face to face with. He knew exactly what was embroidered on it—a white and red Uchiha fan.

"I can't," Itachi said as Sasuke straightened. "I can't wear this." He wanted to be acknowledged. He desperately wanted that. But just his existence. The connection. The thought of donning the emblem was overwhelming. "I don't have the right. I'm not an Uchiha. My mother didn't marry into the clan and I wasn't raised here. I don't know anything about it. I'm a bastard, technically, so I'm not—"

"You'll wear it," Sasuke said quietly. "Those are things your people care about. I don't care about them. You have a Sharingan. But more importantly, you are my brother's child. Wear it."

He couldn't speak. He just stood there, trembling. He knew he had to choke out some kind of response. He just didn't know what to say. "Okay."

"I will need to tell you about the clan," Sasuke informed him. "All of it. Show you, actually."

Show me? Itachi wondered.

"Did you hear what…did you hear what Kakashi said?"

"Yes," Sasuke said.

"What he was…what he was like… with you?" Itachi asked. "Did he…torture you?"

"Yes."

Itachi's blood went cold.

He could hear in Sasuke's voice, just in the way he breathed the word, that further divulgence would be painful for his uncle.

Itachi didn't say anything—couldn't say anything. He just stared down at his feet.

What about my mother? Is that why she doesn't want to talk about him?

He knew about her. About her proclivity for pain. The sordid truth of her life. She didn't know he knew, but he had seen things, heard things, and people talked….

"He was a lot of things," Sasuke said quietly. "Or he pretended to be a lot of things. Mostly, he was just himself, my older brother, a rogue Shinobi, but a Shinobi of the Leaf to the end. Now is not the time to tell you. You and your sister will hear it together."

Itachi closed his eyes, tried to imagine it… When all this was over, he and Rina would sit together on the porch and hear the truth about all the things Itachi had imagined when his mother told him who his father really was. He and Rina together…

Please be all right, Rina.

"Sasuke," Kakashi said suddenly, clearing his throat.

Itachi blinked himself to attention.

Sasuke didn't respond.

"Sasuke," Kakashi repeated. "Sakura—"

Sasuke squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't want to talk about Sakura right now!" He shouted it roughly, harshly, that Itachi raised his head in surprise. "I can't do anything for Sakura!"

"Sasuke," Kakashi repeated, calmly, with forbearance.

"I'm serious, Kakashi. I don't need you to lecture me. I don't—"

"I'm only trying to tell you that Sakura is here," Kakashi interrupted smoothly, and pointed.

Itachi looked at the same time Sasuke turned.

Sakura *was* there. Her outline was clearly visible at the edge of the light. She was garbed for battle, her hair pulled back and her Konoha headband gleaming on her forehead. She was staring at them, at Sasuke with Itachi, at the bandana around Itachi's head, the Uchiha fan covering his eye.

Sasuke was staring at her too, right into her green eyes. He didn't say anything to her. He didn't even seem to be breathing.

"It's time," Sakura whispered, clearing her throat. "Sasuke, Naruto is waiting to transport you to the Grass with Hinata and Shino." Her

tone was so cool. So controlled. "Itachi should say goodbye to his mother. And the rest of us should prepare to be transported with the greater forces."

Silence.

Sasuke tore his eyes away from her. "Take care of them," he said. His voice was gruff, like pebbles rubbed together, loaded with emotion. It was unclear who he was speaking to.

Sakura bit her lip. Kakashi lifted a hand, half a wave, half an acknowledgment.

And then Sasuke was gone.

One second, his uncle was standing right in front of him, talking to him. The next, it was like a breath of wind had wiped him away.

"Wow," he heard Yukio say. "I want to learn how to do that."

Itachi didn't say anything. He reached up to touch the bandana covering his eye.

Hang on, Rina , he thought. *We're coming for you.*

Rhythm.

Tempo.

Melody.

Harmony.

Structure.

Texture.

Form.

Articulation.

Dynamics.

Timbre.

Pitch.

Tone.

The answer was there. Somewhere.

Focus.

Two beats. Thump thump.

No. Not two. An eighth and a sixteenth, repeated in 6 -8 time. 60 beats per measure, with an accent, yes, on the eighth, every eighth…

My heart…

The paper was blurry.

I am crying.

Rina's hands tightened into fists against the desk, her short nails scratching across the music sheets scattered in front of her.

The room was quiet. The Grass Shinobi called Juo, the one with the eyes matted in black, had brought her here. It was a peculiar room, a room with no corners, rather like a fox den, the floor covered with brightly colored mats made from bamboo. There was a long desk in the back of the room, almost as long as the room itself. There was an assortment of instruments scattered across it. That would have been a welcome sight, at any other time.

The members of her music group were there too: Anton, who could play anything, Kara, a flutist with the voice of a nightingale, Terry,

percussionist, and Lin, the violinist. They let out exclamations when they first saw her. They talked all at once. Terry said that Gehard promised she would come. Kara, only eight years old, asked if they could go home now. Lin, even younger, cried for her mother. Anton, who had always been a little funny in his interactions, was the only one who didn't speak. He was sitting by the wall, a stringed instrument foreign to Rina cradled in his lap. He didn't play it. He just held it, the way a smaller child might hold onto a blanket. But his dark eyes followed her with interest.

Rina didn't know what to say to them. She couldn't find her words. Instead, she walked straight to the desk and sat at the far end of it. There were music sheets there, stacked in a neat pile, with pencils lined up beside them in a row. When she didn't say anything, the others lapsed into silence. An hour passed. And then another. The others paced a little, slept a little, spoke to each other in whispers, and looked at her from time to time, but they didn't approach or speak to her.

They're afraid.

She knew it. And it was her fault. They were here because of her. They deserved to be told what was going on, but Rina didn't dare speak, not with the Shinobi guards watching her every movement from the door.

I will give something away , she thought frantically. *They can't know what I know…that I know anything. I mustn't say anything.*

No. She should *do* something.

Butall she could do was think about how awful she was.

She was cold, shivering, in fact, but hardly felt it. All her feelings were on the inside. She felt sick from them. Like she had swallowed a basketful of moths and they were all fighting to get out.

I am so stupid. It is all my fault. I am so sorry.

She hated herself. And she hated that she hated herself. She hated when she was *like* this. It was because she was like this that she was here. She had felt all the wrong things, believed all the wrong things. How could she be so stupid? All her life, she had been so emotional. When she was sad, when she was upset, when she was lonely…it was like falling into quicksand, like drowning at the bottom of a well. It was a spiral, a snake devouring its own tail, a vortex of darkness, black ink creeping up the walls…delicate and sweet, cloying and destructive. It took her over softly and stealthily, like sleep, like the shadow…

Too many metaphors.

I can't express it.

She had believed that everyone forgot her. No one cared about her. She wasn't important to anyone or anything. Everything was about Itachi. She could just not exist and it wouldn't change a single thing. And now she was thinking they *ought* to forget her, because she was so seriously stupid.

She dropped her head on the desk, covering her ears with her hands.

Stop , she told herself. *Stop. Stop. Stop* .

Itachi could stop it. He could break the spell. He had done it before. One time back home, when she was so afraid she couldn't sleep, he had told her she was *silly* . And she *felt* silly when he said it, mortified even, because Itachi was always calm, and his eyes shone with affection when he spoke to her, no matter how she was being. He smiled at her. He held her when she cried. When he said it was okay, she believed him. And he watched her create.

The song she composed that day was the one that got her into the conservatory.

Everything is equal, he had said to her. That you can produce such beauty, Rina, such wonder, such poignancy and hopefulness and beauty with song is because of how deeply you feel, and because of how deeply you feel, sometimes you can go the other way…to darkness, to sadness, to hopelessness and loneliness. It's okay, Rina.

Why didn't I talk to Itachi? Why don't I talk *?*

At home she had spent hours creating. In Konoha, though…

It's different. It's silent there.

She felt it the moment she stepped into the village.

It wasn't just that it was a new place. A strange place. It was a place with no sound. Where was the music?

Hidden Leaf. What did that mean? She had wandered it, round and round, trying to find out. A place of secrets. A place in the forest. But it was more. She spent hours watching leaves fall. Leaves. Leaves. Leaves. They made no sound. But there *was* music in them, somewhere deep. A sad song. A song of silence. And the people… The Shinobi…

They were just like that.

The realization cut her to the heart.

I will die if I stay here.

No, she realized now. That was not right. Dramatic, Itachi would have scolded her.

I would not have died. Not really.

Now, though… Now she was a captive of the Grass. She hadn't meant for that to happen. It was so obvious now. It was all her fault.

I can fix it , she thought. *I can fix this. Everything I know. Everything I've learned.*

Chakra. The answer lay there. The energy of the body. The energy of the mind. Experience. Perception. In a way, chakra was like music, wasn't it? It could be analyzed and understood and crafted the same way, she was certain of it. Twelve hand signs. Twelve notes in the chromatic scale.

Rhythm.

Tempo.

Melody.

Harmony.

Structure.

Form.

Texture.

Articulation.

Dynamics.

Timbre.

Pitch.

Tone.

The pieces were all there.

I can create it. I can create…whatever I imagine.

She had done it before. She had done it to Yukio. Caught him without him even being aware of it. It just required her to dig down

inside herself, to that deep place where creation came from, where there was fear, and sadness, and hopelessness, and to impose those feelings onto someone else. To *make* them feel as she felt. To *make* them see as she wanted them to see. To make what she imagined *real* to them.

Genjustu.

The door opened.

Rina turned her head.

And almost gasped aloud.

Jered?

It was. It *was* . Jered Lassen. She knew that honest, homely face, those brown eyes. The last she had seen him, he was bleeding and bruised. Itachi had punched him. Right in the face. He had called their mother a whore.

So long ago.

So far away.

The Shinobi guards let him in. They seemed to know him. He crossed the room, his eyes on her, making a beeline straight for her. She clamped her teeth shut. So tight her jaw ached.

Don't cry.

"Rina," he said when he got close. Quietly. Softly. "You remember Marnix Almar? Lady Romjin?"

Those names. Yes.

Higher Houses. Mama doesn't like them. Don't speak.

"They're in charge here," Jered told her. "They came with your father. My family is here too."

His hands were shaking. She could see it. He was scared. He pulled out the chair beside her and sat down. He reached out for a sheet of paper and picked up a pen.

"They just want you to be good, Rina," he said. "They say that your mother will come for you. They definitely think she will."

Rina's heart jumped.

Mama will come to get me.

But Jered was writing on the staff paper.

Don't do that , she thought. *Shinobi see everything.*

But he wasn't writing words.

He was drawing notes.

She listened to Jered talk, her heart beating in her ears, as her eyes watched his hands bubble out the notes of a song. She knew that song. It was a simple tune, one most kids learned when they were in grade school. It was depressing, but easy to play.

"They're going to negotiate your release," Jered told her. "I hear them talking, so I know. They have it all planned out. So just be good, okay? You can write a song while you wait."

The song Jered wrote was called The Funeral Bridge.

His voice was sober. He tapped the paper. "They will negotiate with the Leaf and you'll be with your brother soon. Do you understand?"

Rina stared at the notes marching across the paper.

It was a strange feeling she had. Distant. Unreal.

Itachi. They're going to kill Itachi. Kill me. And mama too. All of us.

Her heart was going to burst.

"Where is Itachi?" Tears leaked from her eyes.

"I…I don't know," Jered said.

A desperate, angry moan escaped her mouth, quietly contained.

My fault. My fault.

"No. No. No."

She could feel something deep within her, stirring, forming…

Not tears.

Chakra.

I have to do something.

There were Shinobi guards at the door, watching her every move. How could she get past them? And if she did somehow escape this room, where would she go? How could she stop anything? Control anything?

She took a deep breath, looking around the room. There were the conservatory kids, chairs, a table, instruments…

Jered had set the pen by her hand. Squeezing her eyes shut, she wrapped her fingers around it, gripping it tightly. She drew the paper closer to her.

And began to compose.

The effects of the Hokage's transportation jutsu left Lucia feeling dizzy. She hung her head for a moment, took deep breaths, and

looked up.

The horizon stretched out before her in a flat, unbroken line. The terrain was the same as far as the eye could see, a dark ocean of knee-high, waving blades of grass, undulating softly under starlight, barely distinguishable from one another. Above, the sky was an endless black canvas, smattered with twinkling stars like freckles on the face of God.

"This is the Land of Grass?" Lucia murmured to Ino.

Ino nodded silently.

"It's beautiful."

The other woman did not reply. Lucia suspected she would see a new side of Ino today. Her usually chatty friend was garbed in Shinobi fighting gear. A dark plum-colored shirt clung to her body like a second skin, leaving her midriff bare. Weapons were concealed about her person. Lucia had watched her wrap a dark ribbon concealing a thin, flexible wire around her high ponytail.

And that was not as surprising as Tenten, Rina's polite school teacher. Lucia had watched her lay out dozens of weapons, from elegant throwing blades to wicked double axes, some half the size of the girl who carried them. She set them down on an unfurled scroll and made a hand sign. The weapons vanished. She rolled the scroll up until it was no more than half again the size of her hand, which she tucked into a sash tied around her waist.

That's impossible , Lucia had thought, even as she watched it happen. Then promptly stopped worrying about it.

Neji was speaking to Tenten now, whispering into her ear several yards away. The two were close, standing in each other's space, their fingers dangling close together just millimeters from touching.

They're in love , Lucia thought.

The next thought was stranger.

So am I.

Only her lover was ten years in the ground.

She had been woken a little over an hour ago by Ino. She came to groggy and confused, the hospital pillow wet with tears she did not remember shedding. She felt like she had slept a week. In a grave.

Was any of it real? She wondered when she remembered where she was and what had happened. Sasuke had hypnotized her with the Sharingan. And she had seen…

Can a jutsu revive the dead…even if just in a dream?

She wanted to believe that if such a thing were possible, Itachi Uchiha would have had more to say to her.

Rock Lee arrived as she was thinking. She could just make him out, speeding through the grass on long legged leaps that made it look like he was flying.

The Hokage was talking with Shikamaru, her other bodyguard, but they both looked up as Lee approached. This Naruto was just a clone of the real Hokage, but Lucia had been informed that the difference was immaterial, and he would not be staying with them in any case. Another clone had gone with Sasuke, Hinata, and Shino to infiltrate the Village Hidden in the Grass and find her daughter. The real Naruto was back in the village, preparing to move the Leaf's forces to surround the Grass in secret.

"The village isn't far," Lee reported, breathing hard as he came to a stop. "Maybe an hour's walk. If you are slow." He eyed Lucia doubtfully.

"Were you seen?" Shikamaru asked, his hands shoved deeply into his pockets.

"I should think so," Lee said. "But I did not encounter any sentries or scouts."

Shikamaru just nodded.

Lucia understood. To be seen was the objective. Her task here was to distract the Grass until Rina could be found and safely freed by Sasuke, who was supported by Hinata and the Shinobi named Shino. If Lucia's party had been seen, the Grass Shinobi would be running to tell their village. They would know her by description.

"Where is the village exactly?" Ino asked. "I've never been there before."

"None of us have," Shikamaru said. "The Grass are very secretive, more so than other villages. They keep to themselves and are quiet unless they are disturbed."

"Like snakes," Ino muttered.

"Their village is peculiar," Lee said. "These plains look to go on forever, but at a certain point you come to a drop. The village is at the bottom of a steep descent, hard to get to without jutsu, with only narrow passages and walls on all sides. The village itself is small, maybe a hundred dwellings in all. I didn't get close enough to be able to tell you more."

"Should be bigger than that," Shikamaru muttered. "There may be more you couldn't see from your vantage. Perhaps they have carved out living space in the surrounding rock, or underground."

"I thought so as well," Lee said.

The Hokage scratched his head. "Hmm, if that's true, it will make this a little tougher. I'll inform the captains and trust you to do what's best, Shikamaru." He turned to Lucia. "You know what to do?"

"Yes," she said.

"Shikamaru might be recognized as a close advisor of mine so he's going to cover his face," Naruto told her. "Stay close to him and Ino. Listen to them and don't worry." He grinned at her, his blue eyes gleaming. "No matter what happens, remember that I'm Hokage and I've made you a promise."

Shikamaru grunted, pulling a shroud across his face. Ino smiled.

Lucia said nothing. What was a promise from the Hokage worth? She didn't know. She did know that if there was fighting, there was little she could do to help. At this juncture, she had nothing but faith in Naruto's promise and resolution in her own path.

But I can't waver. I never could.

Naruto's clone vanished, clouds of white dissipating into the night air.

"Okay," Shikamaru said. "Lee, circle wide, a little out of eyesight. If anything unexpected occurs, retreat and inform the Hokage. Neji, you lead us. Tenten, take the rear. Ino will stay in the center, closest to Lucia."

The walk to the Village Hidden in the Grass was mostly a silent affair. Mindful that they were certainly being watched, Lucia did not engage Ino in conversation. It wouldn't be prudent to show too much friendliness with the Leaf Shinobi if she wanted to be seen as a client. Neji walked some distance ahead, his peculiar eyes staring intently at the horizon. Every once in awhile he warned them of hidden obstacles in their path—sudden drops, mud pits, and critters in the grass that Lucia would never have seen.

Her thoughts were preoccupied. Who would she be negotiating with for Rina's life? She knew all members of the Higher Houses and none were pleasant, but some were worse than others. Her one hope was that Gehard had some spine in him when it came to Rina, but that hope was not large. Gehard could be a vicious, powerful fighter when his opponent was weaker than him. Courage was another matter entirely.

"Grass Shinobi," Neji warned, interrupting her thoughts. "Keep walking. We'll confront them soon."

Lucia drew a deep breath . *This is it.*

They walked another few hundred paces before Shinobi appeared, rising from the grass in front of them just a stone's throw away. There were five in all, forming a semi circle that blocked their path.

"Lucia Berculo?" one of the Shinobi asked. It sounded like a woman, though it was impossible to tell for sure as the Shinobi was wrapped head to foot in strips of cloth so that only the eyes and mouth showed.

"Van Alstyne," Lucia corrected coolly.

"Gehard Berculo assures us that he is your husband. Presently, the Lord Marnix Almar and the Lady Romjin await you," the mummified Shinobi told her.

Almar. Romjin.

Lucia's mouth tightened. She knew Marnix well and had had dealings with the Lady, who she remembered as a wizened crone with a sour mouth and hard eyes. Neither one was what she would consider accommodating.

"They insist you come to the village," the Grass Shinobi added. "Where you can rest and discuss the matter at leisure."

Shikamaru gave her a sharp glance.

They want to bring us into *the village?* Lucia thought. She had assumed the negotiation would take place in the open. *We'll be hostages.*

"I prefer to discuss the terms on more neutral ground," Lucia said.

The Grass Shinobi did not even blink. "My apologies, but they are most particular, Mrs. Berculo. They say come to the table they have set or not at all. If you refuse, they express their regrets."

They'll send me pieces of Rina until I comply. I have no choice.

"Very well," she said.

"Lucia," Shikamaru whispered beside her.

"I know," Lucia said quietly back. "You do not have to come if you do not wish to. I am willing to trade myself for Rina's safety, as I told the Hokage."

"That's not what I was going to say," Shikamaru said, his black eyes glittering as he assessed the Grass askance. "I considered this possibility. What I was going to say is that you must do everything you can to get us in a *private* room. Preferably something with four walls, no windows, and one door. Something that can comfortably accommodate all of us."

Lucia nodded slowly. Something defensible. And it was important that they not split up.

The Grass Shinobi were watching, waiting for her response. It probably didn't look suspicious. Of course they would expect her to receive consultation from the Shinobi she hired to protect her.

"I will come to the table," Lucia told the Grass. "But I will take my bodyguards with me."

"As expected," the Grass Shinobi in the wrapping murmured, bowing to her slightly. "Let's proceed."

But the Grass Shinobi did not move. The *land* did.

It took Lucia a moment of stunned observation to realize what was happening. The ground was opening before them, like the gaping maw of a monster crouched in the weeds. It was a hatch, covered

with grass, with stairs leading steeply down a red-brown tunnel lined with torches.

She felt Shikamaru's surprise beside her.

The village Lee scouted is a fake , Lucia thought. *At least, it is not the whole village.*

Rina would not be easy to get to, not like this! And neither would they. First, the retrieval team would have to find a way in, and once inside, it would be difficult to move around, likely impossible without being seen.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. *It doesn't matter. I have no choice. I have to try. I have to trust the Hokage. There must be some way.*

Rock Lee was not with their group. If he was watching, as Shikamaru had said, and went unseen, the information would at least be carried back.

She couldn't worry about it. Military tactics were not her strength.

Two of the Grass Shinobi entered the tunnel ahead of them, leading the way. Lucia's party proceeded in the same formation they had assumed so far, with Neji in front, followed by Ino, then Lucia, then Shikamaru, and Tenten last. The last three Grass Shinobi followed Tenten. When everyone was in the tunnel, the hatch was lowered, enclosing them all in torch-lit darkness.

There will be no sunrise today , Lucia thought as the entrance closed completely, shutting out the sky. She wondered how many tunnels there were, which led to sky, and which led to Rina.

The air was not as musty as she expected. It smelled of rich loam and tree roots. She made her way slowly, step by careful step, her eyes glued to Ino's back. The tunnel descended gradually for what felt like a mile, growing steadily colder, the ground underfoot harder.

None of the Shinobi showed any fear, but the deeper they went, the more claustrophobic Lucia felt.

At length, the tunnel broadened and flattened and they came to a crossway with several branching tunnels. The Grass Shinobi led them to the one farthest on the right. Another minute and they crossed through a second intersection. None of the crossways were perfectly straight. Two more intersections and Lucia was already lost.

She kept her eyes fixated on Ino's swaying ponytail.

The two Grass Shinobi leading the group eventually stopped and stepped back, showing Lucia into what looked like hollowed out cave. There was no door, just an archway, and no way the room would accommodate all of the Leaf she had brought with her. There was something that passed for a table in the room, if a slab of unpolished wood and two rickety chairs counted.

This is my part , she thought grimly.

She turned to the Grass. "This is too small."

"We can show your bodyguards to another room, Mrs. Berculo," their Grass guide murmured. "You are here to talk to Lord Marnix, yes?"

Lord Marnix . She had come here to talk to Gehard and negotiate for her daughter. If the Grass were calling Marnix Lord, something was off. Trying to get her into a room like this seemed like the kind of game he would play, just to see how far he could push her bargaining power.

"I need a room three times this size," Lucia said.

"Mrs. Berculo, these accommodations—"

"Are inferior and insulting," Lucia interrupted. "There must be comfortable chairs, good lighting, and refreshments as well. We have been traveling all night."

That last part wasn't true, but the Grass Shinobi couldn't know that. Let them think the Leaf had half killed themselves to bring her here so quickly. Let them think she had rushed here in a panic, without any planning at all.

It was difficult to read the Shinobi woman's eyes. Lucia was quite sure it was a woman now, by the slight floral scent wafting from whatever product she used in her hair.

The Grass Shinobi led them on. Lucia followed her guide through several more intersections, until she felt sure they had doubled back the way they came. At length, their host stepped back, showing them into a new room.

This one was no better than the last. It was only a little bit bigger and the table and chairs only a little nicer. Furthermore, it seemed to be some sort of meeting chamber, with doors on all sides.

"No," Lucia said immediately.

"Ms. Berculo—"

Lucia rounded on her sharply. "Testing me this way is a waste of time. I won't accept less than I have asked for. I am on equal status with Lord Marnix. Let there be no mistake."

The Shinobi woman was silent for a moment. "This way, Lady Van Alstyne," she said.

The next room was perfect. It was large enough to host a small party, with a single door that bolted from the inside. The floor was covered with colorful rugs and multiple lamps emitted a soft, calming light that illuminated every corner. The table was of a decent size, with four heavy chairs and one extra one propped against the far wall.

Neji inspected the room carefully, lapping it twice before nodding to her.

Lucia murmured her approval. The Grass Kunoichi and one other who escorted them retreated, while the other three Grass ninja remained outside the room.

Lucia shut the door and took a seat at the table.

It was only after she sat down that she realized she was shaking.

This is a death trap. I was not brought here to negotiate.

"There is nothing structurally to worry about," Neji said, as if guessing her thoughts. He looked not only at the walls, but also the ceiling and floor, as if he could see through them. "They saw that I am Huuga. If they meant to hide anything or anyone in this room for eavesdropping or other purposes, they have removed it."

"No kidding?" Ino muttered. "Seems like this Marnix has bought the Grass and swallowed them whole, though, doesn't it? Did they really call him *Lord* ?"

"Don't believe everything you hear," Tenten said. "There was a lot of tension coming off of those guys."

"Don't believe everything you see either," Shikamaru said. "Even you, Neji. The Grass is known for having powerful tricks."

Ino yawned, stretching her arms over her head. "Yeah, well… I'm going to park myself in the back."

They are not afraid, Lucia thought wonderingly. *Or at least they make a very good show of it.*

Ino moved one of the chairs along the wall to just behind Lucia and sat down so that her eyes would be on Lucia's back during the negotiation. Shikamaru sat at the table in the chair beside Lucia, looking pensive. Tenten and Neji took places on either side of the door.

They didn't wait long.

Marnix and Lady Romjin arrived within minutes, flanked by two Grass Shinobi apiece. These were different Shinobi than their escorts, all four men. Two were enormous, well over six feet tall and built like monsters. They looked to be related, with the same chins and crooked noses, but one had red-orange irises while the other one had irises that were a vibrant indigo.

Some oddness there , Lucia thought.

The other two Shinobi did not appear to be of any relation, though they were of the same build, strong but slim, much like Gehard. The more muscular of the two had gray eyes and a bald head. He showed a good deal of bare skin, every inch covered with tattoos of animals inked in violet and black. The other wore two swords over one shoulder, sheathed separately. He had lank wheat-colored hair, pale skin and cold, dead eyes—so cold that Lucia wondered for a moment if he was a corpse.

Anything might be possible with Shinobi.

But it wasn't the Shinobi guards—if that was what they were—who most drew her eye. Behind them came Marnix Almar and Lady Romjin, who sat across from her and Shikamaru at the table.

They sized each other up in silence.

Marnix was just as she remembered him, large and muscled, like an ox, with that famous chain dangling from around his neck and a face that seemed stuck in a permanent expression of apathy and condescension. In comparison, Lady Romjin was a withered old stick, her wrinkled hands and skinny arms hidden by the long, wide sleeves of a black silk robe. Her face was like a leather skin mask pulled tight over her skull, spotted by the sun. Wisps of white hair stuck out the top of long shawl that she wore over her head and around her shoulders. But her eyes were dark and calculating, and they regarded Lucia with hate.

Is that personal? Lucia wondered. She had never done anything to the Lady that she knew of. House Romjin was one of the oldest houses, incredibly steeped in tradition. Perhaps she had offended the old woman's sensibilities.

"Lucia," Marnix said. His voice had a rich, cascading quality, like velvet. It was pleasant. And it made her hackles rise. "I am told you requested refreshments." He seemed amused. "I apologize, but I'm afraid we don'-"

"Where is Rina?" she demanded, clipping him off. "Produce her immediately."

"No."

"What do you want?"

His eyes didn't change at all. "Everything you have."

She almost smiled at him. Marnix had no idea what she really had, but that wasn't what this was about. "I can't do that."

I really can't, not even for my daughter.

They stared at each other across the table.

Around her, the Shinobi were sizing each other up like strange cats. One of the monster men, the one with the indigo eyes, was smiling predatorily at Tenten, who was a third his size, dainty by comparison. She exchanged glances with Neji occasionally, her fingers twitching behind her back, where she had stashed her scroll, but did not touch it.

"Where is Gehard?" Lucia asked Marnix, changing the conversation. He should be here, negotiating, or at least throwing in little comments he knew would upset her. That he was not here said something. But what?

Marnix doesn't need him? Or doesn't trust *him?*

"I thought it best to speak with you first myself." Marnix gave her an indulgent smile. There was no warmth in it.

She returned it. "Did House Almar kill my father?"

Shikamaru's eyes flickered in her direction. He seemed to be almost ignoring her conversation with Marnix, as if he really was just a bodyguard, his eyes fixated on Lady Romjin across from him, who had yet to speak.

Marnix didn't notice. He merely fingered the chain around his neck. "I'm hurt, Lucia, that you would even suggest such a thing. Your father's death was tragic. Ties between our families go back hundreds of years. You married one of my cousins."

That was true. The Almar family and the Berculo family were related, though Gehard and Marnix were not close. But why mention it? Did Marnix mean to insinuate that he could inherit her fortune if something were to happen to her, her children, her sister, *and* Gehard?

Is that why Marnix chose to come to these lands in the first place?

It was the kind of complicated orchestration Marnix was well known for. Getting rid of her immediate family was the endgame, but there would be a number of prior manipulations necessary, since he was nowhere close to being her relative. He would have had to have been working on it quietly for some time, getting the proper buy-in from the other families, setting up the necessary documents, buying the right judges...

"Your father's behavior was upsetting to my House, I won't deny it," Marnix said. "The Van Alstyne fortune must remain in the family, Lucia—the legitimate family—the *greater* family. All the houses know this. I had nothing to do with his death, but whatever your father believed, whatever he might have told you, you can't just walk out. We all thought that was made clear to you."

Yes. By the torture and death of my mother.

"I only want to live in peace," she lied. "Let Rina go. She is a little girl. She has done nothing."

"Rina is meaningless to me," Marnix said dismissively. "You, on the other hand, stand accused of infidelity, theft, and betrayal. Renounce your children's right to inherit, and we will not have a problem. I can send Rina home." His nodded toward Shikamaru. "No blood need be shed on either side."

Lucia did not answer.

She wondered what the Grass Shinobi thought of all of this. They could not know much of the politics involved. The way Marnix laid it out might sound reasonable to a bystander. If she had not opened up to the Hokage, the Leaf might have found Marnix's proposal attractive.

"Surrender yourself," Marnix said, leaning back. "Tell us where your father hid your family's fortune. Put an end to all of this."

"And if I refuse?" Lucia demanded.

"Then you are the most selfish woman alive."

Lucia met Marnix in the eyes. "Is *that* all you think I am? Selfish?"

"I know you well," Marnix murmured. "You think you are some great mystery, Lucia. But you're not. You're the same girl you were at thirteen."

Lucia stiffened.

Marnix eyes were dull and cold. "How many boyfriends did you go through? When you were young?" He smiled at her. "Or perhaps I should say: how many went through you? The rumors vary. But, yes, I know you, Lucia. Girls like you are all the same. You grow up

thinking people are something different than they are, men especially. Each time, you think 'this one really loves you.' "

He laughed at her expression.

"Always the same girl."

Lucia couldn't feel her hands or parts of her face. She couldn't speak.

This is just Marnix, she reminded herself *. This is what he does.*

Marnix continued, his eyes as cold as his words. "You doubt me?"

Lucia did not reply. Marnix was not wrong about her history. She had been used. She had been stupid. And in such a cliché fashion too. She lost her virginity at thirteen to a boy a few years older who swore he loved her. He was a classmate at her school, polished and well-read, with a bookishness about him that she found disarming. He was so earnest in his pursuit. How could someone like that abuse her? Yet he was the first to call her a whore and she had been labeled that way ever since. Men had always seemed to swarm around her, but they were all liars, and all good at it. Some were just better than others. A few managed to trick her. Their interest in her differed. Money. Beauty. Sex. Status. A Challenge. Nothing else.

Marnix wasn't done. "This Shinobi whose children you bore. Do you think he loved you?"

"You don't know what you are talking about," she said. "You don't know Itachi Uchiha. I didn't even know him."

"I don't have to," Marnix said. "I am a man, so I know men, and all men will tell you that there is not much difference between us when it comes to attractive women, especially when we are young. You are an attractive woman, Lucia. But you know that, don't you?"

She didn't answer. She didn't like this.

"By morning, was he gone, wasn't he?"

Lucia said nothing.

Marnix smiled. "You see, Lucia. That's your mistake. You think you are cold, but you aren't cold enough. It was business when you made a calculated decision to have your child by a Shinobi, wasn't it? A useful idea. Aggressive. I admire your pluck. But you erred when you believed there was some kind of *meaning* in it. Two children? Why, I asked myself, would you bother? All that accomplished was making you twice as vulnerable. But the answer is obvious. As cold as you've become, you still have a woman's heart. Still that same little girl I remember, used over and over until she turned to ice, still desperate for someone to take away the chill. You keep making the same mistakes. You fell in love with him, didn't you, this rogue assassin lover of yours?"

No.

Itachi had been different...had *felt* different. And not because he hurt her. That had only been a small part-though a pleasurable part-of what was really going on. She thought of her time in that cabin at the crossroads, the look in Itachi Uchiha's eye as he lay stretched out beside her. He would watch her as she came down, sweaty and disheveled, her thoughts a wreck but her body floating. He stayed all night. But Marnix wasn't incorrect. Come the dawn, he might caress her skin, tousle her hair, kiss her forehead. But he would also leave. All in silence.

Was silence Itachi's lie? To say nothing and let her believe whatever she wanted? Was it possible that her perception, everything she felt, thought, and believed about Itachi, about their relationship, was no more tangible than her dream?

How can you know what is real, if you can never see outside your own head?

Marnix seemed to see it in her face. He leaned forward. "Let me simplify this for you, Lucia." He looked her straight in the eye and leaned forward. "You have never been loved. You will never be loved."

Her fingertips pressed against the table, so hard that the nails turned white. "Why are you telling me this? What does it have to do with anything?"

His eyes were fixated on her face. "I want you to understand what kind of woman you are. I want you to understand that you never went anywhere, could never go anywhere. No matter how many deals you've made, no matter how much money you have, you are still the same. Just a woman. Weak. Needy. Desperate for love. Desperate enough, I think, to have put your trust in these Shinobi, thinking that people here are somehow different than the people you know. But people like us can never trust, Lucia. Never."

She sensed something in that, something foreboding.

Marnix turned his eyes on Shikamaru. "I've been told that the Leaf has a reputation for peaceful resolutions. Leave this woman here, now, alone with me, and you will have peace. We will drop this."

"I can't do that," Shikamaru said.

"Of course not," Marnix said. "Because she has paid you. But what if I were to pay you more?"

"It's not an option."

"Your loyalty is cheering. I have been assured by my Shinobi that they are also loyal."

He looked back at Lucia. "I don't trust you, though, Lucia. You have incentive to hire more than guards, and the resources to pay for it. I just want you to know that a trap has been set for your rescuers or assassins or whatever they are. I am not a fool."

Sasuke's group has been discovered. We're going to be killed, Lucia thought instantly.

Marnix made a curious gesture.

Beside him, Lady Romjin—who had not spoken a word—suddenly… rippled. And was gone. A Shinobi was sitting in Lady Romjin's place, a Shinobi with dark eyes, long black hair, and knives all over his person. The hate in the eyes was still there... not hate for her personally, she realized with revulsion, but for everyone and everything.

A Grass assassin. Lady Romjin was never in this room.

Beside her, Shikamaru shoved back his chair, but not quickly enough it seemed, because two knives appeared suddenly in his chest, thrown from right across the table.

Everything happened too fast. Lucia could make sense of none of it. There was motion, shouting, a burst of green and white light. Dimly, she was aware that ferocious fighting had broken out amongst the Shinobi. She caught a glimpse of Tenten, her scroll unfurling behind her, weapons flying. Neji had engaged the Grass Shinobi on the other side of the door. In that amount of time, she got so far as to stand up from the chair, blood pounding in her ears. The Shinobi across the table, the one who had been Lady Romjin, the one who had killed Shikamaru, was holding a knife by the blade, aiming it right at for her heart. He smiled, but it was a smile without joy, without even appreciation. The smile was almost lazy.

What do I do? she thought. *What can I do?*

Suddenly, everything felt extremely far away, like watching the world from the end of a very dark tunnel. She tried to move, to dodge, to run, to scream…

Her body would not obey her commands.

Have I gone catatonic?

The knife left the Shinobi's fingers. She watched the blade hurtling toward her.

Her hand reached up and caught it by the handle.

No, I can't. But how did I-

It's okay, Lucia. I've got this.

The voice was not her own. She was not in control of her own body.

Ino?

In the hour before sunrise, the blackness had lightened by a hair, leaving The Village Hidden in the Grass awash in purple-gray shadows.

The darkness didn't obscure Sasuke's vision at all. He crouched beside Naruto's clone at the edge of the outermost street, scanning the lines of houses just ahead.

"It's quiet," Naruto's clone muttered.

"Yes," Hinata said from the other side of Naruto. She had one hand on the ground and the other on her knee, head lifted, penetrating the blackness with her Byakugan. "There aren't any people here."

She was right. Chakra use from an entire village of Shinobi should be immediately evident. It wasn't. The houses he could see were empty. Some of the doors had even been left swinging on silent hinges, open into blackness. It was too quiet.

"The real Grass is probably beneath us," Shino said. "According to my burrowing beetles, there's a mass of tunnels, stretching for miles."

So how do we get in? Sasuke thought. He could blow a hole in the ground right where they were, but he dare not. They didn't know where Rina was. And what of Lucia's party? They clearly were not here, so they must be underground as well. Getting in via an explosion would draw every Grass Shinobi to them like a swarm of angry bees and might trap or even kill their friends. There had to be another way. There were probably multiple ways.

As he was thinking, his Sharingan caught movement on the horizon behind Naruto—just a whisper of something dark moving against something darker.

Grass?

Behind him he heard Hinata draw a sharp breath.

She's seen it too, Sasuke thought. *The village has been evacuated because this is a trap. They might have had alarms. They're going to attack us.*

He was not surprised. He expected it. He doubted they expected to find *him* .

Rising to his feet, he drew his katana. The sword slid out of its sheathe with a metallic whisper.

"The Grass," Sasuke said.

"There's a lot of them," Hinata was saying, scanning the horizon. "More than we should—"

Sasuke drove the edge of the blade into Naruto's neck. The anger and indignation on his face… at another time, he would have found it amusing.

"Sasuke!" Hinata gasped, whirling on her toes, her eyes wide. "Why —?"

It was Shino who answered. He was still in a crouch, staring into the village, not moving. "If we confront Grass, Naruto cannot be here. He will be recognized."

Sasuke cast Shino an annoyed look as Naruto's clone vanished. He didn't need someone to explain for him. "I never agreed that he could come in the first place. At least the real him will know what is going on."

"He is going to be annoyed with you," Shino said. "But he has other things to focus on. Getting all the Leaf here will not be easy for him, and it looks like we are going to need them after all."

There will be fighting , Sasuke thought. *And a lot of death, if I don't get Rina soon.*

"We need to find a way underground before they're on us," Hinata said, echoing his thoughts.

Sasuke did not disagree with her. Shouldering his katana, he led Hinata and Shino into the village. Beetles swarmed around Shino like a dark cloud. The host of insects inspected every building they passed, searching for evidence of a passageway leading underground. Hinata used her eyes, peering deeply into everything.

There's too many buildings , Sasuke thought. *I just want to see the tunnels.*

They had moved only three streets into the village when a Grass Shinobi came hurtling at them from around the side of a house, armed with a sword. Sasuke knocked blade from his hand almost effortlessly. It spun off into the darkness. Sasuke's blade lit up with Nagashi. A heartbeat later, Sasuke's katana ran his assailant through the chest.

Awash in blue-white light, he could see everything in the face of the Grass Shinobi he had just skewered. It was a handsome face,

young, maybe seventeen or eighteen. In the pupils of his opponent's eyes, he could see the reflection of his Sharingan.

"Uchiha," the Shinobi croaked. There was recognition in his eyes. "You're here…"

Yes , Sasuke thought. *"* Where is she?"

But the Shinobi didn't answer. His body slid off Sasuke's katana like warm butter, leaving the blade smeared an unholy red.

"This one broke command," Shino said. "The bulk of their force is over there." He pointed to a ridge lined with trees. "There are at least a hundred. Maybe more."

"We mustn't be caught," Hinata breathed.

Sasuke turned to look at all the houses stretching out before them, empty and lifeless, like tombs. Somewhere among them was a path to the real Village of the Grass. That he was certain of. But it would take time to search through so many houses for hidden walls, trap doors, and tunnels under cellars, even with the help of Shino's beetles and Hinata's Byakugan. Before long, they would be contesting every inch of ground.

Rina can't wait for that , he thought. *The Leaf will be here soon. If we don't have her by the time we engage the bulk of the Grass's forces, we may lose her.*

He couldn't stand the thought of it.

Itachi, this is your daughter. Your son is counting on me. Their mother too.

He couldn't fail.

If only all the obstructions could all be cleared away…the whole village.

It can.

He closed his left eye. And opened it.

The Mangekou Sharingan came to him like breathing.

"Amaterasu."

TBC (in December)

A/N:

Well… this was a bitch of a chapter to write. I may have underwritten or overwritten it. I've been working on it for so long I am not sure. Thank you to my beta, who reassured me! I hope it was good?

Here are the scenes. Please comment! I am doing NaNoWriMo so please please encourage me to keep writing! Even if not everything was awesome.

Scene 1: Juo and the Grass

Scene 2: Sasuke at home

Scene 3: Itachi trains with Kakashi / Sasuke's parting gift

Scene 4: Rina contemplates her fate

Scene 5: Lucia negotiates with Marnix

Scene 6: Sasuke invades the Grass

Chapter 23

I did win NaNoWriMo. 50,000 words in 30 days. A book will emerge from this…eventually. If you like my writing and want to be notified when I have a finished manuscript, let me know.

I did start working on this chapter of White Rain in December. Started working. It took MONTHS to write. I had to invent so many new things. On top of which, in the middle of November, crazy stuff happened in real life. I was put in charge of an enormous project, which (you guessed it) ran from November to March. I've been too tired to write as much as usual, which has been depressing, and this chapter was difficult to boot. So many characters, setting changes, and action sequences. I've been staring at it for so long I have no idea if it's good or not anymore. I do apologize. And to people who reviewed in recent weeks, and everyone who reviews when I post, THANK YOU. You are my inspiration.

Other Notes (veiled spoiler): A character has recently died in the manga that appears in this story. Oh well!

White Rain

Chapter 23

By Zapenstap

Konoha's forces stole through the plains surrounding the Village Hidden in the Grass just as dawn broke across the horizon. Daylight turned the shadowy sea of grass to molten gold. Each blade, wavering tall and slender against the sky, glowed yellow in the sunlight.

Itachi followed close behind Sakura, his teammates Amaya and Haro in single file behind him, with Yukio and his team just behind them.

Kakashi brought up the rear of their group.

There were other Konoha Shinobi in the area, but they were not seen or heard. Itachi only knew they were there because he had been briefed on it before the Hokage transported them. Ninja moved swiftly and silently, hidden by dips and hills in the land and by the grass itself.

According to their intel, the Grass Village was located only a few miles away. It resided at the bottom of a valley and was surrounded on all sides by steep cliffs. There were ways in and out, of course, but the paths down were narrow and treacherous. Stealthy infiltration of the valley would require work.

Ahead of him, Sakura stopped suddenly.

Itachi stopped behind her in a crouch. Someone was approaching.

In the pathway before them, the blades of grass moved, pushed aside to reveal Naruto, easily identifiable by the embroidered flames licking the hem of his Hokage cloak. It was probably a clone. Itachi had no idea how many Narutos there were, but he had seen five in the village, transporting Shinobi to the Grass in batches.

He wondered how Naruto's clone had found their group, but he did not wonder too hard. Naruto was Hokage after all.

"What is it?" Sakura asked, crouched low in the grass, balancing on the balls of her feet with her hands on her knees.

By the expression on Naruto's face, it was something dire. Itachi watched as Naruto conversed quietly with Sakura, too quietly for him to hear. Itachi stayed where he was, awaiting instruction.

After Sakura and the Hokage finished speaking, Naruto's clone vanished, not in a puff, but in a flash of light.

From further back in the line, he heard Yukio chortle excitedly. Amaya shushed him.

Itachi didn't feel like celebrating. The news was bad. He could tell by the expression on Sakura's face.

"What?" he demanded as she twisted around. "What has happened?"

"The village is on fire," Sakura told them all. "Black flames have consumed every building."

"Sasuke?" Kakashi murmured from the back of the line. "The Amaterasu."

Sakura nodded.

Itachi didn't understand. Or, rather, he understood, but did not believe. "My uncle has burned the Grass village?"

"The villagers?" Amaya gasped from behind him. "Civilians too? Women and children and babies and everyone?"

"The village is empty," Sakura said. "The true Grass lies underground. But even so, this is not good. They are not likely to forgive us for burning their homes and now our surprise is blown. They will organize a defense, and they could come at us from anywhere. We might be walking above them now."

Itachi shifted uncomfortably, eyeing the dirt beneath his feet. Would enemy Shinobi spring out of the ground all around them? What if they had already taken out their Leaf comrades? He couldn't hear or see anything. How could he know? No. Naruto would have known. And there were sensor ninja and messengers. But still, it made him nervous. Where was safety?

Not here. This is battle. But I knew that coming in.

What mattered was bringing his sister home.

She was always mine to protect.

"What do we do?" Amaya asked Sakura.

"We proceed," Sakura said heavily. "And hope they don't attack us, and just not for obvious reasons, but because the whole point of this is to get Rina out swiftly and intimidate the Grass into submission to minimize the loss of life. If fighting breaks out before we have her, this will get ugly."

Itachi had a sudden image of the tall waving yellow grass around them trampled under his boots and soaked in blood.

The charcoal of burned and blackened wood cracked beneath Sasuke's feet. Around him, the buildings of the Grass Village were wreathed in black flame. The roads had become rivers of molten rock. He could hear the shouts of the Grass ninja—hordes of them on the outskirts of the village—but he paid them little mind. They were no doubt horror struck by what he had done. But they couldn't get around the fire to confront him.

The hell fire of Amaterasu didn't touch the land directly around him. Where he walked, the black flames advanced before and behind him, enclosing him in a safe, if charred, circle. Hinata and Shino stayed close, flanking him on either side. A cloud of beetles buzzed close to Shino's hood. Hinata's Byakugan scanned ahead, penetrating the smoke and black fire more deeply than his Sharingan.

"There," she said, pointing. "There's a tunnel beneath that building."

The "building" was little more than a husk now, Amaterasu still licking at a frame of cross beams and pillars that remained of an otherwise completely-consumed structure.

Sasuke killed the flames with his Sharingan, scattering the fire with the direction of his eye and forcing what remained to consume itself

until even the heat was gone.

"Let's go," Sasuke said.

Hinata looked around. "What about the Grass Village?"

The rest of the village was still ablaze. The buildings had gone up like tinder, black flames shooting heavenward over a hundred paces. Plumes of thick, black smoke billowed above the village in an ever-growing cloud. Unchecked, it would soon spread to the surrounding grassland. The entire valley would soon become an inferno.

"Let it burn," Sasuke said.

Hinata exchanged a worried look with Shino.

"For how long?" Hinata asked.

"For seven days and seven nights," Sasuke said with a shrug, "or until the Grass surrenders and I have Rina safely with me, unharmed. Whichever the Grass chooses."

Hinata fell silent, but she looked troubled. She had been kidnapped herself once. Why didn't she understand? What was she worried about? Negotiations for peace? Nothing mattered except getting Rina back. He would burn the Grass village seven times over if it would accomplish that faster.

"You'll prevent our own people from coming to our aid," Shino pointed out. His hands were shoved deeply in his pockets, his hood pulled up over his head and his eyes shaded by goggles.

"I don't need their aid," Sasuke said. "Or yours if you think this is the wrong course. Naruto might place peace with the Grass above Rina's life. I do not. If need be, I will go alone."

With that, Sasuke turned and made his way toward the building that Hinata had indicated led underground.

Hinata and Shino followed, silently denying his assertion.

Together, they picked their way through the debris until they found a hatch made of stone. Beneath it, as Hinata had seen with her Byakugan, was a dark opening into an underground tunnel. A ladder against one side led six feet down to a dirt floor.

Sasuke didn't bother with the ladder. He jumped into the tunnel, landing softly on the balls of his feet, like a cat, and drew his katana. The tunnel was easily wide enough to wield it. Hinata climbed down the ladder behind him, and Shino followed behind her. Sasuke peered into the blackness with his Sharingan. The tunnel was empty, but further down, Sasuke could see the red, flickering light of torches. Grass Shinobi?

Sasuke didn't wait for the others. He broke into a run, gliding through the tunnel on silent feet, his eyes and ears straining for enemies.

He was disappointed. The light came from sconces on the walls, not enemy Grass. Sasuke's fist tightened around his sword hilt. The firelight illuminated five different passageways. Which led to Rina?

Hinata caught up to him just as he was about to choose.

"We don't know where she is," she said in a breathless whisper, reaching for his sleeve to slow him down. "Let Shino send beetles as scouts."

"Already done," Shino murmured, crossing his arms. "It is good you brought me. But even if my chakra beetles find the little girl, it's going to be murder tracking them." He looked up at the ceiling, were white roots dangled from the earth. "This place is like an ant hill."

"We question everyone we come across," Sasuke said.

"These are Shinobi," Hinata said, worry in her eyes. "We are invading their village. They will not talk. And Naruto doesn't want-"

"My mission is not to be soft on the Grass," Sasuke said.

"And if they overwhelm us?" Hinata said. "This was supposed to be a secret infiltration. They know we are here now."

Sasuke closed his eyes, sensing his chakra and familiarizing himself with the depth of his power. It had been a long time since he flexed his ability to his full potential. Exhibition bouts with Naruto, which were usually under extreme and often absurd handicaps, did not begin to cover it.

"They won't stand against me," he said to Hinata, his voice ringing cold in his ears.

Hinata's face was pale in the torchlight. He knew she didn't approve, but she also didn't disagree. She knew he was not wrong. And she did not balk or abandon him. Shino's face was harder to read.

They moved on.

The tunnel sloped downward, carrying them deeper into the catacombs. Sasuke made a mental map of the place as they wound through the tunnels, memorizing it with his Sharingan so he would not forget it on the way out. As they moved deeper, Shino began collecting beetles.

"Not that way," he muttered at the next crossway. "This one has been down there," he said, indicating a beetle flexing its wings on the index finger of his right hand. "Rina was not detected."

So they went the other way, moving more or less levelly. The silence was unnerving.

"Everyone must have gone above to attack us," Hinata said in a whisper.

"Or we're in the wrong area," Shino said. "Some of these tunnels may be used more than others."

At the next crossroads, Shino picked up another beetle from a sconce on the wall.

"Ah," he said.

"Have you found her?" Hinata asked.

"No, but I was right. This area is not heavily populated. We need to head North." He pointed down one the tunnels. "Be ready."

Sasuke's grip tightened on the hilt of his katana. He stole down the tunnel indicated, his Sharingan eye piercing straight ahead.

He saw the first kunai coming, even though it let fly from the darkness of a hidden alcove. He crouched and the kunai zoomed past him to skid harmlessly across the ground.

Whoever threw that is clumsy.

His katana came out of its sheath as silently and smoothly as silk. He was upon his assailant before they had time to draw a second breath, yanking the figure from the darkness by the color of his shirt and pressing the blade to his throat.

It was a child.

A Genin-thirteen years old maybe. Had Sasuke looked this young when he had been training with Orochimaru? This boy was not fully grown, skinny and pale with downy dark red hair, freckles, and baby fat in his cheeks.

"Konoha?" the boy gasped, staring at his headband and kicking his legs in Sasuke's grip.

"Uchiha," Sasuke answered.

The boy's lips whitened.

Hinata and Shino trotted up behind him. Hinata's cheeks were flushed, her eyes wide.

"Where is the Leaf Academy girl?" Sasuke demanded of the Genin. He pressed his blade into the boy's neck.

"Sasuke," Hinata warned in a soft voice. "You can't. Not a child."

The boy struggled, saying nothing, his eyes wild.

"Can't I?" Sasuke flexed his sword arm. The blade cut the Grass Genin's skin, drawing blood. Droplets bubbled up from the white flesh, coating the silver of the blade with red and spilling down the boy's neck. The boy raised his chin, eyes shining with anger and fear in the firelight, his body shaking.

A commotion drew Sasuke's attention.

Another Grass boy had arrived in the corridor, this one athletically built with strong arms and a lean body, but just as young as the boy on the other side of Sasuke's katana. There was a girl just behind him, spindly with knobby knees, short dark hair, and heavily made-up eyes. They were the teammates of the boy in Sasuke's grip. He could tell by the expressions on their faces.

Three Genin. Not the fight he expected…if it could even be called that.

But perhaps this encounter could be leveraged.

"Tell me where to find the Leaf Academy girl," Sasuke said to the new arrivals, "and I won't kill him."

"That's Sasuke, Renji," the girl whispered. "Look. The Uchiha emblem."

"No way," the athletic-looking boy named Renji said, taking a half step in front of her. "They said he wouldn't come."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes.

"I'll give you one more chance," Sasuke said. "Tell me where to find the girl, or your companion dies."

They said nothing.

Very well.

Bright red blood drenched the blade of his katana as he sliced through the throat of the skinny boy he had pinned to the dirt wall. It was easy, like cutting fruit. Darker blood bubbled from the deep gash in his kid's severed neck. His eyes turned instantly glassy.

The girl screamed. Renji shouted, kunai coming into his hands and flying from his fingers in a smooth, practiced motion… all useless, of course. The kid was pretty good for his age, maybe even Chuunin level, but Sasuke was not threatened by Chuunin. He evaded the kunai easily, using the boy's comrade as a shield. The blades thudded into the dead kid's chest. Sasuke dropped the body. His hands were completing signs before the corpse hit the floor.

" *Katon. Gokakyu no Jutsu* ."

The two Grass Genin were still reacting when red flame from Sasuke's katon blazed between them in a swirling funnel of heat and death. It separated them cleanly, as each fled to the wall closest to them to avoid the fire. He advanced upon the girl first, catching her as he had her dead teammate. Terror made her face look like a mask—like something that wasn't real. He remembered seeing fear like that once, in Sakura, the time they had faced Orochimaru together in the Forest of Death. His reaction to it now was callous.

Her hair was short, but not short enough. He seized a handful of it, right at base of her skull, and forced her head back. She fought him, kicking and twisting, but he was stronger. Despite her thrashing, her body obeyed, knees dropping to the earth and back bending, head wrenched toward her heels. Sasuke's bloody katana arched over her

exposed throat. He turned to face Renji, who was in a crouch, his hands struggling to form hand signs he could not seem to remember. Looking at the kid—at those dark eyes filled with hate and fear and helplessness—was like looking at his past self.

I used to be like that. I thought I was so tough. How foolish.

"Let's try this again," Sasuke said quietly. "Tell me where I can find the Leaf Academy girl, and I will release you both. I didn't come here to kill Grass Genin. I came here to take back my brother's child, wrongfully stolen by your Shinobi."

Renji's hands continued to shake.

A hard choice , Sasuke thought. *Save his teammate and betray his village or betray his village and lose his teammate. He has no hope against me. It is one or the other* .

"I will find her anyway," Sasuke told him. "The question is how many of you I have to kill wasting time looking for her."

He assessed Renji's face. And knew, after a few moments, what this boy's choice would be.

He wanted to swear. He was going to run, warn the others, and leave the girl behind.

Your loyalty to your village—toward whatever orders you've been given—is worthless. You don't understand. Or if you do understand, then—

Chakra.

He sensed it early.

And quickly broke the Genjutsu.

The red-haired boy lay slumped against the wall, eyes glassy but breathing. Only a trickle of blood marred the pale skin of his neck.

Further down the hallway, the girl was lying on her back, unconscious. Renji was coming out of it, head bobbing as if sleepy or drunk, his hands shaking. He looked from one teammate to the other, seeming stunned and uncertain.

Sasuke had not moved anything but his eyes. He still stood beside Hinata.

"More Shinobi," Hinata hissed, her Byakugan straining. "From both sides." She turned to address that problem. Shino turned with her, hands still stuffed in his coat pockets, a cloud of beetles forming around him.

Sasuke stayed his ground.

The Grass Shinobi approached in pairs, two from the same direction the Grass Genin had come, and the other two from behind. Three male, one female, though the latter was so wrapped in bandages that it was hard to tell. All of them had hard eyes, hard faces.

The cloud of bugs forming around Shino thickened. "Jounin," he said, his words muffled and barely discernible.

Looking the newcomers over, Sasuke had to agree.

Hinata assumed a defensive stance, thumbs tucked into her palms.

"I'll take two," Sasuke said nonchalantly, eyeing the two blocking his way to Rina—one of the males and the female. They stopped a few yards up the north end of the tunnel, watching him warily.

Between them, Renji rose slowly. He backed up, almost tripping over the unconscious body of the girl—his comrade.

"Go, brother," the male Jounin facing Sasuke said to the boy. This Jounin was rail thin and dressed all in gray, hands tucked in his pockets. He spoke quietly, too quietly to be overheard, but Sasuke did not need to hear. His eyes could easily read his lips. "Much was

sacrificed for our present advantage. Uchiha must not recover the Leaf girl."

Renji—apparently the younger brother of this Jounin, or someone regarded as a brother—looked to his comrades, hesitating.

"Renji," the Jounin said, his tone hardening. "Go. You know what orders have been given. See that they are carried out. You don't have to do it yourself."

Renji nodded.

The woman beside the Jounin said nothing, her dark eyes glittering.

Renji ducked between the pair of them and raced up the tunnel.

What orders? About Rina?

Sasuke made to pursue the boy.

As he expected, the male Jounin moved to block his path, forming a series of hand signs in quick succession. Sasuke watched and memorized, his Sharingan tracking the movements all in an instant, almost lazily, though the Grass Jounin moved incredibly fast.

"Storm of needles."

Aptly described.

The storm came sidewise, thousands of needles enhanced by Wind chakra flying at him like rain through a window, except these raindrops could piece vital organs and kill. There was no way to track them all, or wouldn't have been, if he didn't have a Sharingan.

He's aimed for my eyes , he perceived.

Those Senbon were probably specially treated. If they touched him —if they even got close—he would find out how.

Evasion was not possible, and he was conscious too of Hinata and Shino behind him. One of the Jounin coming at them from behind had engaged Hinata in hand-to-hand combat, occupying her attention, at the same moment Sasuke was attached. When the man moved, it was slick, not merely fast, but like oil. The man's body didn't seem to be all together solid—a challenge for Hinata's technique.

Meanwhile, Shino had engaged the remaining Grass Jounin, his swarm of beetles acting as cloak, decoy, and weapon all at once, keeping the other male from attacking Hinata and the female from attacking Sasuke.

If Sasuke simply moved, they might be hit.

All of this flashed through his mind the second the needles took shape. Hand signs came to him a moment later.

Having a Sharingan allowed him to copy Jutsu, making the hardest part about fighting not the releasing of a counterattack, but *choosing* a counterattack from his arsenal, which was extensive.

As rusty as he had become, it still came to him like breathing.

The Storm of Needles hurdled toward him. He completed the sequence of hand signs and the Senbon met a wall of chakra that crackled white-blue with lightning. That wall blew out with a sound like the clap of thunder. The force of the boom rent the air in front of him, sending his Shinobi opponent tripping backward over his heels. The woman beside him stumbled and fell. Meanwhile, the needles that had been coming for Sasuke spun and thudded harmlessly into the walls on either side of the tunnel.

Two seconds. Two down.

In the next breath, he gathered his chakra, drove his katana into the ground, and released Chidori Nagashi.

The female Shinobi stiffened, her body wracked with lightning, every muscle becoming instantly paralyzed. The man recovered and evaded, leaping at the moment the current passed beneath him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sasuke saw Hinata still locked in combat with the Jounin. Shino, though, lay crumpled against the tunnel wall, blood oozing from a wound on his head, his body surrounded in a protective mass of hissing beetles. The Jounin who had dropped him was now aiming a jutsu for Sasuke.

Sasuke's rage blazed. But his heart felt ice cold.

The Grass Jounin on the north side was initiating another jutsu. They were going to try and hit him from both sides.

I'm not here to play games.

His Sharingan deepened into the Mangekyou.

"Susanoo."

He heard a gasp from the Jounin behind him as whatever attack he had thrown was blocked by the armor of the great ethereal warrior that surrounded Sasuke's body. In front of him, the Jounin who had thrown the Senbon stared with wide eyes.

That moment of shock was all Sasuke needed.

He surged forward, his katana rotating in his hand, and skewered the Grass Jounin blocking the north end of the tunnel just beneath the sternum. The blade slid into his body like butter. He yanked it back out, partway. Red blood stained the blade to the hilt.

This time, there was no genjutsu.

"I'm not here to mess around," Sasuke whispered into man's ear. "Where is Rina?"

At his feet, the woman was glaring at him with hateful, murderous eyes, still unable to move, her muscles trembling from the shock of Chidori Nagashi that had enveloped her whole body and sapped her strength.

The Jounin's hands tightened reflexively around Sasuke's blade. Blood oozed from his fingers. "Dead," he answered, "with any luck."

"Was that the order given?"

The Jounin looked right into his eyes. A foolish mistake. Sasuke pushed his advantage, bearing down with the Sharingan. His opponent broke under that stare.

"She is to be put down by poison," he answered, almost babbling. "An assassin was dispatched. The Council couldn't refuse. Why should we? There is so much to gain."

Sasuke's blood beat loud in his ears. He almost couldn't hear over the pounding of his heart and the rage he felt flooding his body.

His brother's family… *his* family.

Not again.

"Who wants it?" Sasuke demanded.

"Marnix."

Marnix? That did not sound like the name of a Grass Shinobi. It must be the client. Someone from Lucia's home? What about Gehard? He didn't care. It was just another name for the list that was growing in his head.

"It was to be done peacefully," the Jounin gasped. "The girl was not to feel any pain."

"No peace," Sasuke answered coldly, and twisted his blade. His palms slipped on the blood now coating the pommel. "Mark me. If I

find Rina dead, the Grass will find no peace. Not ever."

The Jounin stared at him. Understanding came into his face in a flicker, but died almost as soon as it was birthed. Sasuke watched life fade from the man's eyes, taking all emotion with it. A corpse slid off his blade.

I have killed a young boy's older brother , he thought coldly.

The woman was trying to get up. Sasuke looked down at her, meeting that frightened, hate-filled gaze with one of his own.

It only took one look to lock her in Tsukuyomi.

Using Tsukuyomi was an immensely effective interrogation technique, as it wasted none of the time of other techniques. He recreated an illusion of the current situation down to the last detail, and then let the Grass ninja's chakra float free to control the dream, just in front of his control, like a pet on a lead line.

Show me.

He allowed the Grass Kunoichi's will to influence the dream. She wanted to free herself, and so free herself she did, using a jutsu to nullify the effects of Sasuke's Chidori Nagashi. Genjutsu-Sasuke reacted with fury as the woman leapt to her feet, the wrappings around her body unfurling in blast of light and earth-shaking sound.

Genjtsu-Sasuke was blinded. The Grass ninja fled. He allowed it. His will dictated her will.

Run , he thought.

The Kunoichi's dream body bolted through the Grass's twisted corridors, turning left at the first intersection, then a right at the next. The place where Rina was kept…it was not far. She would make it. She would make sure Renji got there in time to warn the guards.

There.

A door in a central tunnel. The Grass ninja turned the handle, opened it.

Genjutsu-Sasuke caught her from behind. There was no approach. No chase. Sasuke simply imagined himself catching her, and so he did.

He felt her terror. Or maybe he fed her terror. In Tsukuyomi, the two blended as one.

The dream is hers. The reality is mine.

She reached for weapons, but he stopped her easily, breaking her wrist with one hand. She cried out.

If Rina is allowed to die, I promise you it will be worse…

His self-projection cupped her face in his hand. Genjutsu-Sasuke looked deeply into her eyes. And showed her. He showed her what he would *do* to the Grass.

He showed her his power—the magnitude of it, the destruction he was capable of. Everyone, everything she cared about, ruined and destroyed. He would clog these tunnels with bodies. He would strip the Grass to its core, destroying every shred of what made it a village, and burn to ashes what remained.

The vision was instantaneous, though long and arduous for the woman, intensified by her own deepest fears—watching the people she loved die. He felt it when her mind snapped under the pressure of her grief.

He released the Tsukuyomi and the woman slumped and fell, head thudding heavily against the dirt floor, eyes rolling back in her head. She lay not far from the two Genin Sasuke had felled similarly with simpler Genjutsu. Whether she ever got up again would depend on the strength of her will to endure what Sasuke had shown her.

Perhaps she would do something to stop it. Something less foolish than challenging him.

He turned to see Hinata deal three successive hits to her opponent, who finally went down in a heap, coughing blood and clutching his lungs. One more hit and he'd be done, but Hinata stopped short and straightened, dark hair clinging to sweaty cheeks. With his Sharingan, Sasuke could tell that her opponent was low on chakra and would not be getting up anytime soon.

The other Jounin was nowhere to be seen.

Coward, Sasuke thought with annoyance *. And he'll bring others to slow me down* .

At least they had won here.

"We won't avoid a battle now," Hinata said, panting. "The one you killed was a leader."

Shino was rising, holding one hand to his head, where his hair was matted with blood. He looked unsteady.

"I told you," Sasuke said to Hinata. "I am not here to coddle the Grass! He told me that Rina is targeted for assassination."

Hinata gasped.

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and raced up the tunnel. They followed, though Shino was moving awkwardly.

He took a left at the first intersection. The next one would be a right…

Damn it.

Dreams were not reality. He was forced to stop because there was no right turn at the second intersection. It all looked different. He spun around.

Is there some secret passage that I missed?

Hinata and Shino came up behind him. Hinata's Byakugan pierced the darkness, but she gave him no guidance. Shino did not speak.

Just when he was about to curse, Sasuke thought he heard the faint sound of music playing from the left-hand tunnel. Could that be her? He followed the sound.

Straight, left, left again.

The music went silent. He stopped again.

When Hinata caught up, she was half supporting Shino, who was now clutching his head.

He heard the sounds of oncoming Shinobi.

There was no time.

Susanoo blazed once again around him, the skeletal figure of the warrior maturing, growing protective armor.

He would not be stopped. He would *barrel* through the Grass.

He would *not* find Rina dead.

Rina stared at the paper in front of her. Staff lines marched across the page like battle lines. The notes clustered together in the measures like troops mustered for war. She stared at the formations, studying the melody.

She took a deep breath.

I can do this.

She glanced up from the paper, letting her eyes cross the room to where the Shinobi guards stood at attention on either side of the

door. Two guards.

Her attention drifted to the other children—Anton, Terry, Kara, and little Lin. Anton was sitting on the floor against the wall, his eyelids drooping, his fingers limp around the instrument he held. Kara and Lin huddled together near Terry. Jered Lassen was sitting right beside her. He had watched Rina write her song, not saying a word, not knowing what she was up to, but hoping, it seemed, that she was up to something.

Rina rose slowly from her seat, lifting the music sheet off the table with trembling hands. Terry, Kara, and Lin were watching her, their eyes full of emotion, as she crossed the room.

Without a word, she held the piece of paper out to Anton.

The Shinobi guards watched, saying nothing. They had heard Jered tell her to write a song while she waited for her mother. They had made no objection. After all, Gehard had brought all these instruments for her, to make her happy. Why shouldn't she play them?

They can't know , she thought. *Nobody knows.*

Anton lifted his head as if coming out of a dream. He looked at the piece of paper dangling before his eyes by her fingers. A spark of interest came into his face when he saw what it was. He sat up, setting the instrument beside him, and took her composition with both hands. The other kids turned to look when he moved.

Anton scanned the music sheet, not saying a word, but Rina knew him, knew that he could memorize a song merely by looking at it, or by hearing it once. He had always been a strange child, obsessive in his hobbies to the point of perfection, and lacking in other matters, especially social skills. Some people didn't like Anton. He was odd, given to tantrums. But he had always gotten along with Rina, who was considered a little odd as well. Anyway, they both loved music. Anton particularly loved *her* music.

"Can you play it?" she asked him.

He didn't answer, but she could see by his eyes that he could. He was playing it already in his mind. His fingers twitched.

"I need parts for everyone," she said.

Anton looked past her at the table full of instruments. Slowly, he got up and approached them. He handed the sheet of paper back to her as he went. He didn't need it anymore.

"He hasn't moved since we got here," Terry said wonderingly. "He hasn't said anything either. Just like you."

"He's going to play now," Rina said. She looked at all three of them. "We are all going to play."

Terry looked surprised. "Why?"

"We're going to play," Rina said, cutting him off. "Because that is what we do."

"I don't have my violin," Lin said in a small voice.

Rina glanced at the instruments on the table. They were in a foreign land and the instruments were mostly foreign. Anton was rifling through them. She heard him humming her melody as he picked up one instrument, his hands drifting over the keys, and then set it down to pick up another.

He's making up a harmony , she thought, eyeing his choices.

The Shinobi guards continued to just watch. They seemed mildly curious. Rina had counted on that. They probably didn't think Rina would be much of a threat. She was not even a Genin. Papa might have known better, if he had any knowledge of what could be done with chakra, but she knew he did not. He would consider musical instruments to be harmless.

Except he's not my papa, Rina thought distractedly.

Her father was a Shinobi named Itachi Uchiha. Probably. She wasn't sure. The uncertainty had filled her with anxiety for months. But she had never brought it up. She was afraid to ask.

If Gehard is not my father, should I not love him? Will mother be mad at me if I can't stop? If Gehard is *my father, then I'm only half Itachi's sister. Will he love me only half as much?*

Stupid. Thinking like that was what had got her here. But the thought persisted.

Anton picked up a stringed instrument from the table. Like the violin, it had a bow. He turned it a couple of different directions, and eventually settled on holding the bow in his right hand with the instrument propped up on the table in front of him with the neck leaning back against his chest and left shoulder.

He studied the strings and then played. It was one note, deep and sad, the vibration echoing throughout the room like a soft, extended sigh. Rina felt her skin tingle from head to toe. It had been so long since she heard music. And Anton was amazing. He played without instruction, without seeming to think about how to do it. One note turned into two, and then a scale. He stopped momentarily to tune the strings, played another scale, paused again, and then played the first measure of Rina's song.

It was a haunting melody, slow, deep, and drawn out. Anton played only the first measure, checked the strings again, and then played the first two measures. He nodded and handed the instrument to Lin, who had been staring with rapt attention since he pulled the bow from the pile.

The little girl took it. She knelt on the floor, propping the instrument on her knees. Her fingers deftly gripped the bow, holding it the same way a Shinobi held a sword, with a deep familiarity, as if it were an extension of her arm. Terry laid Rina's music sheet in front of Lin and

concentration replaced fear. Lin stared at it, her dark, round eyes running across the page, studying. When she tried to play her part, she fumbled at first, the differences from the violin causing her to make mistakes, but she was talented, and persevered until she was working her way through the whole piece.

Anton had moved on. He found a flute. It was vertical instead of horizontal, with fewer holes at unusual intervals. Despite the difference, it took him only a few seconds to figure out a scale. He handed the flute to Kara, who duplicated what he had done. Once she had figured out the basics, she peered over Lin's shoulder at Rina's piece and began to learn the melody.

Terry had already risen to investigate choices in percussion, but Anton had opinions about that too. They gathered quite a few together. Anton then picked up the instrument he had been holding since Rina arrived, and began—perhaps for the first time—to actually play it.

The familiar sound of music being practiced independently—in a cacophony of competing sounds—filled the den. To Rina, it was a beautiful sound. Familiar. Sweet. Jered watched all the activity with bright eyes, straddling a chair in reverse with his arms flung over the high back. The Shinobi guards watched with expressionless faces.

Rina scanned the table. The piano was her favorite and preferred instrument, but there was no piano here. And anyway, she needed something she could take with her.

A piccolo peeked out from beneath a staff of papers. She picked it up, tucked it into the sash where she normally stored kunai.

At that moment, the door opened.

The kids stopped playing.

Rina turned.

She didn't recognize the Shinobi that entered the room. He wore a Grass headband. He was pale with lanky hair, and had a race that reminded her a bit of a rat. She didn't see any weapons on his person, but she saw something in his eyes when he looked at her, something that made her stomach turn to ice. He whispered to one of the guards at the door, who looked at him in surprise.

He's here to kill me , she thought.

She clapped her hands once.

The kids looked at her.

"We… we're going to play," she said, her voice trembling. "Together. Okay?"

Instruments were lifted.

The guards at the door were still conversing with the new arrival. No one stopped her.

Rina lifted her hands to conduct. Her fingers were shaking, but perhaps no one would see. The movements, at least, were familiar. Down, in, out, up—one, two, three, four… one…

It began with a long, tremulous note, deep and soft, played by Kara on the flute. The following set of notes cascaded downward, like a trickle into darkness, where the melody hovered but a moment before buoying up, soft and hushed, and then fell again, deeper than before. Her song was an expression of her feelings—all she had felt since leaving home to come to Konoha. Lin and Anton joined in, a counter melody lifting the flute's song high, but tremulous. They danced together, and then dropped, a sad weave of melodies pulling each other down. Terry added percussion, light but steady, like the delicate beat of an uncertain heart.

The Grass Shinobi with the lanky hair had drawn a needle from his sleeve.

Poison?

She didn't rush. She didn't let her fear overwhelm her. This was a performance. She was *always* scared when she performed, but she performed well, because she didn't rush. At the proper measure, Rina lifted the piccolo and brought it to her lips. This was the most important part, the critical piece, though it was only a subtle harmony to Kara's melody. That wasn't what mattered. What mattered was that she released chakra into each note she played.

Genjutsu, like music, was an act of creation. It was communication by sound, smell, touch, taste, and visual impression, made directly from one mind to another mind. Like a language of the heart, like a dream, but more than a dream. It was her will, her *soul* , imposed upon the senses of another.

TheGrass Shinobi had ears, which meant they were listening. How could they not listen? Genjutsu that played off sound was the most dangerous kind. That had been a lesson of her Academy classes.

She brought them in, all three of them. There was no vision associated with her Genjutsu, nothing to see, no illusion to trick the mind. There was just… music. But music was the language of the world. Her music was beautifully sad, penetrating. She showed them the depth of it, what she had been feeling when she wrote it, the heaviness and the lightness, and knew when they weren't really seeing her anymore, weren't really hearing her. It was her chakra now that sang to them. And that was all they saw, all they heard, all they felt, and all they knew.

She brought the piccolo down and cut off the kids. They lowered their instrument. She turned to the door.

The Shinobi guards and the assassin were standing there, staring, seeing nothing, hearing her song, but only in their minds now. They would not remember they had heard it. They would only stop hearing it when she stopped it, or someone else came to disrupt what she had done.

Jered jumped to his feet. "What's wrong with them? What did you do?"

"They will be fine," Rina said. "We… I have to go."

She tucked the piccolo in her sleeve, securing it with the band that was normally reserved for a hidden kunai.

This is the only weapon I need, she thought, trying to believe it.

She made for the door. The Shinobi stood like statues, looking straight ahead, entrapped by her song. She walked between them and pulled the door open. She eyed the needle in the hands of the assassin who had drawn it. The point glistened with a purple-blue sheen.

How fast would that have killed me?

Her heart was thumping hard in her chest, but she kept walking. The hallway beyond was dark and lit by torches. She stepped into it. Now that she was out, she didn't know what to do.

Jered caught her by the arm. The other kids followed too, Anton bringing up the rear, still holding his instrument by the handle. Kara, Lin, and Terry had left everything behind.

Jered's eyes shone in the torchlight. "I know where one of the exits is," he said. "But it's guarded. Everything is guarded. They won't *let* us out."

What did she do? Maybe she could change her appearance with a transformation jutsu and slip out somehow? She fingered the piccolo at her hip. She knew the hand signs, but she had never tried it. She remembered how long it had taken Itachi to master. Her hands were still shaking. No. She didn't think she could do it.

She could play her song, but she feared she had been lucky with the guards. They had taken her weapons but had been given orders to

allow her to play, not knowing she could use Genjutsu, and she had had time to build up her nerve and prepare. Shinobi she ran into would not wait. Maybe there was a chance to put them under Genjutsu, if they didn't see her before she started…

I can't. I can't. This is too big for me.

Her hands were shaking. She was so scared. She wanted her mother. She wanted her brother. She wanted to go home. She wanted…

Her train of thought was broken by noises coming from the left, somewhere down the tunnel.

"What's that?" Terry whispered.

Butterflies quivered in Rina's stomach. She knew those sounds. Fighting. Fighting between the Grass? Or was the Leaf attacking?

If it's the Leaf…

She didn't know. She didn't know at all, but…

"Sasuke!" she screamed. "Itachi! Itachi! I'm here! Sasuke!"

Someone was coming. Someone was running down the hall toward her, moving fast, very fast.

It was a boy. Wearing a Grass headband.

Panic dropped on her like a curtain. She lifted the piccolo to her lips, but her hands were shaking so bad, she hit her nose instead.

Three seconds. Maybe four. She barely had time to get out two quavering notes out when two shuriken came flying at her. She ducked, but by then the boy was upon her. He knew Taijutsu. She could see it in his form. And he was *good* , and *fast* , faster than Itachi. And she…she was terrible. Actual combat was different, much different than *watching* fights. She forgot everything she had learned

in classes. The boy's fingers aimed for her throat, knocking against her windpipe. She choked. His hand took the piccolo from her, tossing it across the tunnel. A second blow landed against heavy against her chest, and then her legs went out from under her. She fell in a heap, gasping and crying. A moment later she was caught and hoisted like a sack of grain. She screamed, kicking and thrashing, as she was carried up the tunnel.

The faces of the other kids receded, their eyes huge, mouths gaping. Except Anton, who was picking her piccolo up off the ground and inspecting it for marks.

"SASUKE!" she screamed.

"Shut up," the boy said. His hand wrapped around her throat. She couldn't *breathe* . She couldn't…

Lucia couldn't wrench her eyes away from the bodies on the floor. The Grass Shinobi that had been Lady Romjin one moment and a hateful assassin the next lay dead at her feet. A battle axe stood out between his shoulder blades. It had been thrown by Tenten. Beside him lay the body of Shikamaru, two kunai protruding from his chest.

Marnix smiled at her from across the table, but the smile was not amused. It was murderous. He had wanted her hit. He had wanted her killed.

She wanted to shout, to scream at him, to claw at his face with her bare hands, but she was not in control. She could not move her own limbs. Ino—who had somehow taken up residence in her head—moved for her. Her hand held a knife, and her wrist moved back and then forward, flicking the blade straight for Marnix's head.

The aim was true, but the knife passed through Marnix as if his body were merely a projection. Lucia watched, heart beating, a dull roaring in her ears. Ino cursed inside her head and turned toward one of Marnix's guards, the lank-haired Grass Shinobi with the dead

eyes, who had completed a hand sign that turned his body white, like an alabaster statue, and then vanished. A moment later, Marnix's body separated like mist and passed right through the wall.

Had Marnix ever really been in the room with her at all, any more than Lady Romjin had? Lucia didn't know.

I'm leaving you , Ino whispered.

A moment later, the Kunoichi had withdrawn from Lucia's mind.

Lucia gasped, suddenly more alive, like coming up to air after being underwater. The noise was incredible.

The area by the door was chaos. Neji was fighting at close range, spinning and landing what looked like soft blows on the one the hulking guards, the one with the indigo eyes. The man was huge, but when Neji's slender hands touched him, he vomited blood and doubled over. A barbed wire chain encircled Tenten's body like a lasso, hovering safely away from her own skin while lancing the flesh of the man with the orange eyes who attempted to grab her with one meaty hand. Together, Neji and Tenten forced both brutes through the door.

"Close it!" Neji shouted at Tenten. "I'll keep them back."

He spun, and a force of wind and white and green light bloomed around him like a flower opening to sunlight. Shouts reverberated from the other side of the doors.

He's knocked them down , Lucia guessed, though she couldn't see much.

Tenten heaved the door shut, sliding it across its metal grate, and bolted it from the inside.

Would a bolt keep out ninja? She couldn't imagine so. But perhaps it would buy them time.

Lucia's body was shaking.

What do I do?

She moved jerkily, kneeling down beside Shikamaru.

He was completely still. He wasn't breathing. She reached down to touch his face.

The body disintegrated into dust.

A gasp escaped her lips.

"Over here."

Shikamaru's voice.

She turned to look. Shikamaru knelt in at the shadow of the corner. He seemed one with the shadow, keeping perfectly still. His hands were clasped together to form a peculiar hand sign, his eyes on the opposite corner. Unnatural shadows extended from the shadow beneath his feet, snaking out from him like extended arms to merge with the shadow of the sole remaining Grass Shinobi in the room—the one with the bald head and heavily-tattooed body that had come as part of Marnix's guard. That Shinobi returned Shikamaru's stare flatly. He did not move. It seemed he could not.

Tenten and Neji knelt on either side of the door, both of them panting heavily, but not diverting their attention. There was a gash down Tenten's left cheek, blood spilling down one side of her face, but her eyes were hard. Weapons lay scattered everywhere at her feet.

Ino was sitting in the chair behind Lucia, her body coming suddenly to life.

"You were supposed to possess Marnix," Shikamaru said, his eyes shifting toward Ino. "Used him to call off any attack."

"I know," Ino panted. "But there wasn't time. Lucia would have been hit."

Shikamaru grunted acknowledgment.

Lucia hardly knew what to think. One moment she had been staring into the face of an assassin, catching a dagger aimed at her heart with hands she could not control, and the next she felt as if she had had the wind knocked out of her and everything had changed.

They were hardly safe. By the footfalls, it sounded like there were dozens of Grass Shinobi just on the other side of the doors, and more would soon be arriving, Lucia had no doubt. They were not trying hard to get in. Why should they? Lucia and her guards were trapped.

We are hostages , Lucia thought. *We have nowhere to go. They might as well leave us in here for now. If they learn of the Leaf's attack, we could be used as bargaining chips.*

Or perhaps they would just be killed.

She knew this might happen when she agreed to follow the Grass Shinobi below ground. Better her than Rina.

We must try to occupy them long enough for Rina to be rescued .

Perhaps there was something she could learn while she waited for the chips to fall. She looked carefully at their prisoner.

"What are you called?" she asked him.

The Shinobi did not answer.

"You might as well give a name," Tenten said, wiping the blood from her face.

The Shinobi still did not answer. He was tall and lean, his body heavily muscled, and most of his skin exposed. Every inch of it was

inked. The tattoos were black, shades of gray, and accents of purple, like bruises. There was an endless array of shapes and images. She saw a dragon, a sun flare, a pillar wrapped in rose vines, a battle axe, countless geometric shapes and scenes. Hundreds. His body was a mosaic—a work of art unto itself. Even his eyelids were tattooed. She saw that when he blinked. He only did it once.

"He goes by the name Gray," Shikamaru said. "I've heard of him. By report."

"What can he do?" Tenten asked, her hand wrapped around a kunai stuck through her sash. "Those tattoos…"

"Genjutsu," Shikamaru said. "Each of the images on his body represents an aspect of a dream that can ensnare you, if you should be foolish enough to look at any of them when his chakra is unleashed. He has no need for time to craft an illusion because the illusions are permanently crafted, right on his body. Each tattoo is laced with chakra. All it takes is a hand sign to release the chakra and your attention. Not Uchiha-level, but formidable."

"He can't be allowed to make hand signs then," Neji said. "That's why you went for him instead of Marnix. He might have gotten all of us."

"We should render him unconscious," Tenten muttered.

"We might as well ask him some questions first," Shikamaru said. "If he doesn't want to talk—" He shrugged.

Gray was watching Shikamaru, his mouth closed, seemingly uninterested in their conversation.

Shikamaru rose and walked out of his corner. Gray walked out of his corner at the same time, almost as if he were a mirror image of Shikamaru. Shikamaru sat cross-legged on the ground. The Shinobi called Gray mimicked him. Shikamaru put his hands behind his back. Gray mimicked that too.

Ino walked around the perimeter of the room to kneel behind the captive. She pulled the wire from her blonde ponytail and wrapped it around the Shinobi's wrists. It had to have been some kind of special wire judging by his expression when the knot was bound.

Shikamaru released his shadows.

Gray watched them with heavy-lidded eyes. "You might as well kill me," he said. "I will tell you nothing."

Lucia knew little of this man, but looking at him up close, she could see that he was something of an artist. Those tattoos were quite beautiful. And there was depth in his eyes. That was familiar. They reminded her somewhat of Itachi Uchiha. Why should this man die? Loyalty to the Grass she could understand. It was his village, his people, his home. But dying for Marnix? Knowing Marnix as she did, the thought made her angry.

"I bear the Grass no ill will," Lucia said. "If you release my daughter to me unharmed, I will forget this."

"And forsake a mission?" Gray replied with a lifeless smile. "Kill me. At least death is honorable."

"Marnix cares nothing for your village," she countered. "What is honorable about serving him? He will use you and dispose of you."

"He is a client," Gray told her with a shrug. "Lady Berculo, Shinobi are tools. We are *meant* to lead unsavory lives. It is why we exist. Do you object that a man should fulfill his purpose? Your morals do not apply to me."

Shikamaru grunted.

"This is useless," Tenten said. "Naruto would not be happy to hear this, but many Shinobi still think this way. You won't convince him he's wrong."

Lucia thought on that for a moment. "It doesn't matter," she said. "Marnix has made a mistake. He may not have realized it, but he has."

Shikamaru cocked an eyebrow at her.

"There are two kinds of untouchable powers in this world," Lucia explained. "There are those like Shinobi, who live in the shadows, below the power of the laws that govern ordinary civilians. And there are people like Marnix and myself, who reside at the top. We also believe that the morals and expectations of others do not apply to us."

"Your point?"

"Shinobi may be used to living unsavory lives, but at the top, you get comfortable. Very comfortable. Marnix, myself-we have the means to have whatever we want and control everything and everyone around us, because we perceive everyone to be below us." She paused. "Marnix revels in it. I do not think he realizes that Shinobi are not like his other pawns." She looked into Gray's eyes. "In a sense, you and he are on equal footing—neither of you feels compelled to obey rules or conventions."

"How does that help us?" Ino asked. "If anything, that just makes him more dangerous."

"Dangerous, yes," Lucia said. "There is nothing that Marnix thinks he can't do. And because of who he is, I believe he will test that. He does not realize the power Shinobi have. I think he will push the Grass too far, without realizing that they *also* believe there is nothing they can't do."

Gray was silent, but there was something in his eyes…

"I'm right, aren't I?" she whispered. "He's already done something, hasn't he? I know him well. You can tell me about it. I won't be surprised. What has he done?"

Gray said nothing, but she knew she had unsettled him. Marnix *had* done something, something even the hardened Grass Shinobi like gray didn't like, something that offended even *their* morals, and he'd done it for no other reason than to test his power over them.

"Whatever it is," Lucia said. "It is not the end of it. Believe me. It will get worse. I'll ask you again. Should my little girl die for Marnix?"

Gray didn't reply. Lucia forced herself not to be anxious. She could be silent. She could wait.

When Gray opened his mouth, what he said was not what she expected at all.

"Your son," Gray whispered. "Is he really Uchiha?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Assassins have targeted him, and his Sharingan eye offered up as a prize."

Itachi stared down at the Village Hidden in the Grass from the lip of a precipice.

Black fire consumed everything in the valley.

"Well," Sakura said helplessly. "I guess we wait here."

Kakashi stood beside her, his hands his pockets, looking down at the inferno below. Naruto and the bulk of the Leaf's forces had the entire valley surrounded. Itachi's team, because they were mostly Genin, were hanging back further away than most.

But no one can attack until after Sasuke frees Rina , Itachi thought. *We just have to sit and wait for him to emerge with her.*

His mother too. Word had come that his mother had gone into Grass's underground. He wasn't supposed to worry—she had a

strong guard to keep her safe—but how could he *not* worry? His entire family was missing in enemy territory.

Everything is going wrong.

"Hey."

Itachi turned to see Yukio standing beside him. He had pulled his veil down around his shoulders so that his face showed.

"What's the matter? You look upset."

Itachi felt the prickle of annoyance. What was the *matter* ? Where did he start?

He adjusted his Uchiha bandana. He couldn't seem to stop fiddling with it, especially when Yukio was near. Every time he moved it around, he kept expecting to suddenly be able to see out of his injured eye. His eye hurt now that the drugs had worn off. He couldn't forget that. It was especially hard to forget with Yukio standing right there. He vividly recalled what it had felt like when Yukio's kunai slashed his eye down the center. He could still taste the blood in his mouth.

Yukio watched him in silence for a few moments.

"Why do you ask?" Itachi answered.

"I'm concerned. As your friend."

Itachi lowered his hand. *"Friend?"*

"I told you I was sorry, right?"

Itachi couldn't actually remember if Yukio had said that.

Yukio looked uncomfortable. "Okay, okay. Maybe we're not friends yet. I was just thinking… I don't know, since we're going into battle together, that we *should* be friends."

Itachi couldn't answer. He thought about what to say, but the words wouldn't come.

A minute or two passed in silence.

"Do you hate me?" Yukio asked in a very quiet voice.

Itachi gritted his teeth. How was he supposed to respond?

Why should I feel bad about hurting Yukio's feelings?

Maybe he shouldn't, but he did.

"I don't know that I would say that I *hate* you," Itachi said, feeling agitated. " *Haro* hates you. I'm just… I don't forgive you…not yet. I don't know if we can be *friends* . I… I'll think about it. Maybe-"

By the expression on Yukio's face, he had stopped listening halfway through. " *Haro* hates me?" Yukio interrupted. "No way. Truly?"

"Well…yeah."

"Because of what I did to you?"

"He hated you before that."

Yukio looked like he had been socked in the gut.

"Come on," Itachi said, not sure why he was suddenly trying to soothe Yukio's ego. "You had to know that. You mock him constantly. He's *always* mad at you."

"But it's *Haro* . And Haro is so…" He chuckled, as if the mere thought of irritating Haro tickled him and somehow that was a *positive* thing.

Itachi did not relate at all.

I could never be friends with Yukio.

"And you insulted Amaya."

"I don't remember that. When?"

Itachi could scarcely believe what he was hearing. "Before the match… when you jumped us in the glen."

Yukio waved a hand dismissively. "That doesn't count." He paused, reflecting. "I mean, *you* I was genuinely serious about, but Amaya? We've always been competitive. She understands."

"Well something happened before that then because she certainly doesn't like you either. And Haro hates your guts. I thought you knew that."

"No. I mean, I like to rile Haro, sure, but I didn't realize… He really *hates* me? He *said* that?"

"They both think you're a jerk."

Yukio was quiet. The skin between his eyebrows crinkled. Abruptly, he turned and sprinted away.

Itachi felt heat rising on the back of his neck.

Is he going to tell *them…?*

Compulsively, he followed.

It was too late to stop it, though. Yukio was already waving toward Haro. "Haro! Hey."

Haro and Amaya were standing together by a rocky outcropping. They turned at the sound of Yukio's voice, both of them looking startled.

Yukio slowed as he approached them. "I wanted to ask both of you something."

Amaya looked perplexed. "How many times do we have to repeat the orders? Sakura said to wait."

"No. Not that."

Amaya and Haro stared at him, waiting.

"Do you guys hate me?"

Itachi slowed to a stop a little ways from them.

So direct .

He had never met anyone as direct as Yukio.

The expressions on Haro and Amaya's faces were a sight. Haro looked infuriated. Amaya just seemed stunned.

"Well, hate is… hate is a strong word," Amaya said, coloring slightly. "Honestly, I don't—"

"I can't *stand* you," Haro snapped, interrupting her.

Yukio shoved his hands in his pockets. "Why? What did I do?"

"What did you *do* ?" Haro roared. "Seriously? Other than being the most arrogant, loud-mouthed, obnoxious little prick in Konoha? What did you *do* ? You took out Itachi's eye, you—"

"Itachi says you hated me before the match."

Haro looked like he was about to bite Yukio. "You antagonize me *every* day. I've hated you for years! "

"I didn't know," Yukio said, waving his hands. "I mean, I know I rib you, but I didn't know you hated me. I thought—"

"We got in a *fight* last summer!"

Yukio blinked. His eyes drifted to the corner, as if searching for a memory. "Oh yeah. Yeah. I won." He beamed, as if that was the most important part of it. "Now that I think about it, I don't know *why* you pushed me off that wall."

Amaya was goggling.

"You insulted Amaya!" Haro roared.

"I did? What did I say?"

Amaya pulled on Haro's arm. Haro looked like he was about to swing. "Never mind," she said breathlessly. "It's nothing. It doesn't matter. Don't repeat it!"

Yukio just looked puzzled. "Well, I'm sorry," he said. "I don't remember saying anything about Amaya, but if it made you *hate* me, I'm sorry. I probably didn't mean it."

Haro's face was so red it was starting to turn purple.

"Please, let's drop it," Amaya begged him. "Please. Please."

Haro slowly calmed down. The arm held by Amaya was shaking. He was staring at Yukio as if about to take a swing at him now. "You need to be nicer," he said. "If you don't want me to hate you, do something *nice* . For someone else. For *once* !" He shook Amaya off his arm, not meanly, but in an effort to pull free and get away from Yukio. He turned his back on Yukio's expression of amazement and shoved through the tall grass. Amaya followed him.

Yukio just stood there, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Michiko and Jumei trotted up the path to join him. Michiko was talking rapidly. Jumei didn't say anything.

Itachi backed away, leaving Yukio's team to support him.

Does Yukio really not remember? He wondered. Had it just been a long time, or was he being so flippant at the time that it didn't occur to him that he might have hurt Amaya and Haro's feelings? He could see Yukio tossing insults, even deeply hurtful insults, without realizing that they were harmful.

He cares, though , Itachi thought. *He cares what people think of him at least. He's just not very sensitive. Maybe he doesn't realize other people are. He did grow up around Shinobi.*

Itachi moved away from the rocks and found Amaya soothing Haro. The two huddled together at the foot of a grassy knoll.

"Where did *that* come from?" Amaya asked Itachi when he appeared.

"Yukio asked me if we could be friends. It was kind of awkward and I didn't know what to say. He asked me if I hated him and I told him I didn't hate him but that Haro did. Sorry."

"He wants to be your *friend* ?" Haro gasped. " *Your* friend? Oh my god, I want to punch him so bad right now. He took out your eye *yesterday* ."

"I know," Itachi said.

"What did you tell him?" Amaya asked. "About being friends?"

"I told him I would think about it."

Haro goggled at him. Amaya cast Itachi a sidelong look.

"What?" Itachi asked her. "I know it's bad, what he did, but isn't it a good thing that he wants to be friends? To repair things?"

"I don't know," she said. "I think Yukio only wants to be your friend because he feels guilty. No matter how cool he plays it, you can't let him forget that he took out your eye. And also…" She trailed off, looking uncertain.

"What?" Itachi asked.

Amaya glanced to where Kakashi and Sasuke were talking quietly together. "When you first came here you weren't anybody. No one accepted you. No one knew your family. Clan membership is a big deal to Shinobi and Sasuke rejected you. Now, though…" She looked pointed at his headband. "I mean, you're an *Uchiha* . That's huge. Sasuke personally trained you, and now acknowledges you as part of his clan. And now you have Kakashi training you as well. Yukio…Yukio would kill to have that."

Itachi absorbed that silently. "So you think Yukio wants to be my friend because of what it will get him?"

Amaya didn't say anything. She didn't have to.

"He wants to be absolved of what he did to me," Itachi reasoned. "So he can feel better about himself. Plus if he can be my friend, maybe he can benefit from my connections?"

Amaya nodded.

That was hardly unfamiliar. In fact, it was more like what he was used to. All his life, before he had ever heard of Konoha, he had been someone important…well, the son of someone important anyway. There had been a lot of kids that would hang around him and try to get him to identify as part of their group. But he knew they weren't really his friends. That was a big reason why he spent so much time with Rina. There was a difference, though, between the kids of his old school and Yukio. It felt different.

"Yukio wants to be my friend," Itachi said, rolling the word around in his mouth. He stated it again in an effort to try and make sense of what his instinct was telling him. "He wants to be my friend."

As he thought about it, he noticed that Haro was glaring in Yukio's direction…but not at Yukio. He was looking at Jumei. And he was biting his nails.

"What's wrong with *you* ?" Amaya asked him.

"Nothing," Haro said.

"Oh, come on."

"Am I the weak link?"

"What?" She sounded amused.

"Among the six of us. Am the weakest? Jumei is like *ten* times smarter than me. He's a *way* better healer. Yukio may be an ass, but he's an amazing fighter. *You're* amazing. Itachi has a flippin' Sharingan. Michiko can do Genjustu. Plus, she might be a better fighter than me too. What the heck am I contributing?"

"You beat both Jumei and Michiko in a match yesterday, Haro!" Amaya exclaimed.

"I got lucky," he said. "And I had you guys to help me."

"You'll have both of us all the time!"

"I just don't know what I have that's special," he said.

"You're a solid team member. Why do you have to be special?"

He shrugged.

"Well, you're special to *me* ."

He did a double-take. "I am?"

"Of course!"

"As a fighter?"

"As everything. *Honestly* , Haro. Do we have to talk about this now?"

He looked somewhat mollified, but the looks he kept passing Jumei still reeked of jealousy.

Itachi probably wouldn't have noticed anything out of the ordinary if he hadn't averted his eyes at that exact moment to shield Haro from embarrassment. His gaze landed on the grassy knoll behind Haro's head.

The hill was rising.

He blinked his good eye, rubbed it, and looked again.

The hill was definitely rising. Very slowly. It reminded him of a hippo emerging from a river. Only instead of looking into a large mouth with enormous teeth, Itachi found himself staring into the maw of a great cavern, out of which came four Jounin wearing Grass headbands.

He gaped. Words caught in his throat.

"Itachi! MOVE."

Kakashi's voice.

Everything happened so fast.

The Jounin moved like lightning.

Amaya spun, her hands flying to her wired shuriken. She released them in a storm, her hands completing the signs for her White Star Jutsu that made them explode.

Only one went off. The other stars fell limp as a Jounin eight feet tall and half as wide caught the wires in one meaty fist. He jerked with one hand and Amaya dropped to her knees like a fish caught in a hook. He slashed through the wires with a sickle pulled from a strap on his back.

At the same moment that Amaya let her Shuriken fly, Haro threw up an earth wall, but Itachi knew instinctively that that would be way too

little.

He twisted to see Kakashi and Sakura coming for them, but two of the Grass Jounin had circled around to intercept them. One was a woman holding a wide fan. The other was a slim man with eyes that were all pupil—black as night.

The woman opened the fan and swung it.

The heat was incredible. Itachi felt his lungs dry out in one breath, causing him to cough and cover his mouth with his sleeve, and that was just from the air that blew backward from the blast. Sakura and Kakashi were hit by a wall of fire.

When the flames cleared, Sakura, Kakashi, and the two Grass Jounin were gone. It was like the fire had incinerated them completely, but there were no ashes. There was nothing.

What happened to them?

"Itachi!" Amaya screamed, her voice coming to him muffled from somewhere just to his left. "Behind-"

A hand seized him from his blind side. Itachi pulled a kunai from his boot and slashed at the thumb wrapped around his left arm, but the man disarmed him before the blade met flesh and he found himself being pushed face first into the ground, his mouth filling with dirt.

He struggled as cords were wrapped around his wrists.

"Why bind him? Why not just do it here, Juo?" That deep voice came from the huge Shinobi.

"No," the man holding him, the Jounin who must be Juo, answered.

Itachi was hoisted up to his feet and turned to face his captor. He found himself staring into the face of a Shinobi whose face was so cold, his heart froze merely from looking him in the eyes.

This is one of the Grass envoys , he thought, recognizing the man's features. That matted eye makeup was distinctive. *These are the Grass Shinobi who took Rina!*

Juo crouched in front of him, leaning back on his heels with his wrists dangling over his knees. He reached up and pulled the bandana from Itachi's face. He stared impassively into Itachi's blind eye. Itachi stared back, seeing nothing but darkness on one side. His heart was racing. Looking into Juo's eyes, he just knew.

He's here to kill me. He'll do it impassively. And he wants me to know it.

"And these?"

The huge Jounin—Tadashi—had Haro and Amaya's faces pressed to the ground, controlling them as if they had no more strength than a pair of kittens. Perhaps they hadn't. Comparatively.

"We don't need them," Juo said without turning his head. "Get rid of them."

Tadashi grunted.

Itachi's heart beat so hard it felt like it was going to pump itself out of his chest. Tadashi had weapons hanging all over his person. There must be fifty ways to kill a pair of helpless Genin at his disposal.

He had to do something.

But I can't. Two Jounin? I can't do anything. I can't form hand signs. I can't see out of one eye. I…

What had happened to Sakura and Kakashi? They were supposed to protect him! Had they been killed by that wall of fire? He couldn't imagine it, but clearly they were not here. Where had they gone?

I have *to do something. Even if it's just a delay…*

Tadashi tossed Amaya and Haro like sacks of flour. He formed hand signs. Itachi watched, wondering what deadly-

Yukio came flying out of nowhere, his Shadow Cloak activated so that his form blurred into a shapeless mass that was difficult to track. He landed in a crouch smack between Juo and Tadashi, shuriken flying from his hands.

It was brave, leaping between two enemy Jounin like that. And stupid as hell.

The shuriken were obviously meant to be diversionary.

What does he think he is going to be able to do?

Tadashi's jutsu stopped midway. He roared at Yukio. "I remember *you* ! My big toe still smarts, you little shit."

Over the ridge, Itachi saw Michiko and Jumei running toward them.

Juo hoisted Itachi off the ground. As his feet left the earth, Itachi kicked hard, but Juo ignored him. He equally ignored Tadashi's bout with the five Genin. Itachi heard Tadashi laughing. As if he was enjoying a game of Whac-A-Mole.

Itachi writhed in his captor's grip, trying to get an angle where he could scratch or bite or…or anything. He caught glimpses of the fight. Tadashi had brandished a chain sickle, but Yukio was managing to evade it. Michiko was darting in and out of the big Jounin's field of vision, a flash of distracting stripes and swirls of color just out of eyesight. Haro was helping Amaya to her feet. He couldn't see Jumei.

Juo was carrying him toward the mouth of the hill…away from everyone.

If I allow myself to be carried down into that darkness, I'll never emerge , Itachi thought.

He couldn't die. He had come here to save his sister, not to lose his life. Nor his teammates.

He squirmed, fighting the bindings wrapped around his wrists. The cords were tight and did not give no matter how he flailed or worked his elbows.

"Let me go!" he screamed.

Juo's fingers pressed painfully into Itachi's shoulders. "There's nothing you can do. It cannot be avoided. There must be sacrifices. Accept it."

A hollow boom from behind them followed Juo's words.

Itachi gasped, craning his neck.

Tadashi stood in the middle of the Genin, grinning. The ground around him had imploded as if by a small meteor.

What jutsu is that *?*

Itachi's friends were all on the ground, like pins that had been knocked over. Haro and Amaya were on their knees again. Michiko was lying completely still, like a puppet stuffed with straw. Jumei had her head in his lap, panic on his face.

The cords around Itachi's wrists were cut suddenly. His hands came apart.

Juo cursed as Itachi twisted, kicking hard against his captor's shins, and dropped free.

Yukio helped him to his feet, his face veiled, Shadow Cloak flickering. They fled together. Itachi gathered his chakra as his feet ate up the ground, molding it with lightning, and turned just in time to see Juo's hands flash through a sequence of hand signs.

What jutsu...?

He didn't wonder long.

Pure chakra, like Chidori, but long and sinuous, lurid green in color with the head of a serpeant, and wicked fast, struck at Yukio. The jutsu was not encumbered by Yukio's Shadow Cloak. Just like a real snake, it did not seem to rely on sight. It struck like a whip, encircling Yukio's ankles and yanking him off his feet. The chakra snake coiled around his body. From within, Yukio screamed.

No.

The Sharingan came to Itachi without intention. He didn't mean to form it. It just happened.

He meant to do something, to aid Yukio and the others however he could.

Instead, his left eye exploded with pain.

He fell to his knees. It hurt so much, like a million needles had been jabbed into his eye. The pain was all throughout his head. He clutched at the ground, trying to dig himself a hole. Getting the stabbed by Yukio hadn't hurt this much. He felt like he was going to vomit. He wanted to rip his eye out.

Time slowed to a crawl. Seconds felt like years. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

I can't pass out.

He blinked rapidly to increase the tear flow, which soothed the feeling of fire in his eye, if only by a little. He blinked again. And then again, moving his eyelids like butterfly wings, focusing on the particles of dirt between his hands, which came slowly into focus as more of the pain receded.

Both of them.

And then he realized it.

The Sharingan had activated. In *both* eyes.

I can…I can see.

He looked up.

With his right eye, he saw Juo forming hand signs again. It seemed slower…much slower...than before. He could track it now. It came easy. With his left eye…

I can see chakra.

With his left eye! He could *see* . He closed his right eye just to be sure. He could still see Juo. It wasn't quite like his normal vision—the colors were funny and Juo's movements seemed a little distorted-but he could make out his opponent, his surroundings, and most importantly, his *chakra* .

He recognized that jutsu.

Snake in the Grass.

He rose to his feet, his legs shaking, but not tearing his eyes away.

Juo's green snake jutsu came at him.

But he was ready, his own hands moving.

And copied it.

TBC. ASAP.

Please review! I know I am slow at updating. I know. I know. I know. I want to finish this story before summer, even write ahead, and your comments really help me do that. It helps me stay engaged with the story and keeps the creative juices flowing. Most importantly, it makes it feel WORTH it, like somebody cares whether I spend time

on this and how much time I spend. Otherwise I get stuck and then it's hard to get Unstuck.

Five scenes this chapter that you can comment on if you choose

Scene 1: Itachi and the threat of all-out battle with the Grass

Scene 2: Sasuke invades the Grass underground

Scene 3: Rina's genjutsu and attempted escape

Scene 4: Lucia's fight and interrogation

Scene 5: Itachi/Yukio/Grass Assassins

Questions I have:

Is this exciting? Is it TOO much action? Did I do okay with Jutus? I worry, honestly.

Please comment on the characters. I am a character-driven story-teller. :)

What do you think or want to happen next? Hint: Sakura and Kakashi aren't dead (of course). And Naruto will be in the next chapter.

Reviewers from last chapter, I thank you each individually!

Younggem, Mahands, Aster Uchiha, Servant of Agape, Vbabeofhearts, Alien She, greyisblack, IngloriusBastrd, MangamanZX, icecreamlova, , Rinelwin, Guest(s), Itachi's apprentice, cooldood101, DEBob19, Bibliolymphian, korraphilia, MelissaKS, SlowRabbits, refi00, ChewyShus, newtonslaw, BiblioMatsuri, NightRaver, Lifestyle, Bleedingcrimsonheart, Almecestris, MarvelHero1610, SASSafrasEND, Fiendfluyd, LaterThanSunrise, , like nanana, 01 Trycia-chan01, drew, Ylan, Jalan, hymnia, xXxtellmewhyxXx, anonymous (s), fall-into-life,

ScreenSurfer, 00-night-eyes-00, Blade Redwind, Selina Reije Huuga, oxsilvermoonxo, kuromimi, lance, Nitramy, Inara Seraph, InARealPickle, shkh4ever, ijpowers92, reality deviant, seti31, Sayle, BukkakeNoJutsu

Chapter 24

I am writing a novel. Original work. It's a story that involves portals between worlds, magical peoples warring for power, demon creatures that may or may not be evil, and humans that definitely can be. The scope of this work has the potential to be enormous. I wonder if Kishimoto was daunted when he set out to write Naruto?

Anyway, I apologize that this chapter was grossly delayed. These action packed climax chapters are particularly challenging because I have to make up so many jutsus and choreograph fight scenes (note to purists: all rules in Kishi's world may not apply).

White Rain

Chapter 24

By Zapenstap

"Where the *hell* are we?" Sakura demanded.

The landscape had completely changed. Where before there had been endless miles of waving grass, all she saw now were piles of rock and parched earth spread out beneath a blue sky.

"We've been transported," Kakashi said. "If I had to guess, I'd say we're thirty miles northwest from where we were."

"Son of a bitch!"

They weren't alone.

Across from her and Kakashi stood two of Grass Jounin that had risen out of that hill. One was tall and lithe with pupils so large they obscured the whites of his eyes. The other was a woman, husky and blonde, with a strong jaw. She reminded Sakura of Temari of the

Sand, though it wasn't the same woman. The fan she carried wasn't the same either.

I think it was that fan that moved us.

What a power! But worse than that was the realization of what it meant. The Genin—her Genin—were facing the *other* two Jounin alone!

"We don't have time for a fight," she said to Kakahsi. "How do we get back?"

"I can take us back," Kakashi said. He had pulled his headband up, exposing his Sharingan eye.

Sakura felt a flood of relief.

Good ole Kakashi. Anybody else and we'd be stuck.

"Great," she said. "Let's—"

"I think not," the Grass Jounin with the dark pupils interrupted. His hands were quicker.

Sakura reacted instantly, gathering her own chakra. She clenched her fist, nails digging into the leather glove covering her palm.

I can take anything he throws at me-

But the attack wasn't physical.

The Grass Jounin's shadow expanded under his feet. It didn't strike out like Shikamaru's jutsu. This shadow was like a pool of water. It was smooth, darkness spilling across the ground like oil. It flooded into her own shadow before she had time to blink. One moment she was watching it speeding for her feet. The next she couldn't see anything. Absolutely nothing. In every direction was nothing but black. She couldn't even see herself.

Is this a Ninjutsu? Or could it be…Genjutsu?

She concentrated her chakra, searching for disruption, but didn't sense anything. She was good at detecting and countering genjutsu; the more time she spent with Sasuke the better she got. This wasn't genjutsu.

Ninjutsu then.

I'm still really here. This is like the Hidden Mist jutsu.

She moved. The ground felt solid beneath her feet. She remembered the terrain. Shinobi were taught to memorize the battlefield. Situational awareness; it was one of the most important things you could learn as a ninja. There had been a rocky outcropping just to her right. She moved through the darkness, her footfalls as silent as leaves alighting on the ground. Her fingers touched stone.

Good. Nothing has changed but the absence of light.

Could the Grass Jounin responsible for this jutsu see her or was he just as blind? Was the darkness affecting all of them equally? His eyes had been like shadows…

"Sakura, watch out!"

Kakashi's voice.

She ducked and rolled, trusting that voice instinctively. A kunai sailed over her head, clattering on the rocks behind her. The fact that they attacked from a distance, and waited until she spoke, told her that the enemy couldn't see her much better than she could see them. Had Kakshi seen the kunai? Could the Sharingan penetrate this darkness?

No sense staying low. She rose and ran. Her memory served well, and she wasn't afraid of darkness. There was another rocky outcrop just ahead…

I need to get to Kakashi quickly. Or else find a way to lift this shadow!

With her eyes blinded, her other senses just had to work harder. She concentrated, feeling the area around her with her chakra.

She felt the heat coming before it hit.

Barely.

Is that fire *?*

There was no light, only the crackle and warmth and the smell of smoke. It was disorienting. She managed to avoid it by diving for the outcropping she hoped was just ahead. She got lucky, her hands scraping rock and telling her that her aim was true. She drew her knees in close to her body as heat consumed everything around her. The flames could not be *seen* . They did not roast her, but they were *there* , all around her. Fire unseen in darkness!

To get hit with that…well, she could survive it, but it would be painful.

How do I fight? I can sense the flame from the heat, but barely. It gives me only a moment's advantage.

A short distance away she heard the sound of steal pinging against steal. Kakashi was being attacked.

When the heat of the flame subsided, she knew she had only seconds to decide what to do. If she moved, she might be engulfed in another bout of flame. If she didn't, she would surely be attacked by something else. The enemy must know exactly where she had hidden.

Weighing the choices, she moved.

The flames came again. She felt the heat hit her back, but she was quicker. Again they just missed her, snapping at her heels where she had been.

Her assailant was no slouch. She sensed physical movement approaching just after the flames. A sneak attack? It was the woman, she was sure—charging at her like a cannon ball.

That would have been a good tactic on someone else, she thought.

This Kunoichi meant to hit her as she prepared to dodge the fire. After all, Sakura couldn't see, which meant she couldn't fight, right? Ha!

I don't need *to see, not if the enemy is anywhere near me.*

Sakura countered with her fist. She knelt and slammed her knuckles into the ground, destroying the terrain beneath the feet of her enemy. The implosion fanned out far and wide. She was rewarded when her assailant yelped and fell, tumbling loudly. Sakura smiled in satisfaction.

She didn't wait around to gloat. She turned and ran, stealing through the darkness. Where was that—

A hand wrapped around her wrist. She gasped, twisting and throwing her weight, her own kunai coming into her other hand. She gathered her chakra, preparing to crack the bones of…

"It's me," Kakashi whispered. "Don't give us away."

She was just able to make out the Mangekyou Sharingan as darkness dissolved around them.

Sasuke burst into a room full of terrified children and a pile of musical instruments.

He scanned their faces.

Rina was not among them. The realization stoked his fury. He had imagined her here, her cherub face framed with straight, glossy dark

locks turning to look at him, the soulfulness that reminded him of his brother deep in her eyes. He had imagined looking at her—really looking at her for the first time—and telling her it was going to be okay.

What he saw instead were three Grass Shinobi. All three were under a Gejutsu, staring sightlessly at something only they could see.

And he knew, somehow, that he had just missed her.

Suddenly, the Shinobi snapped to attention, blinking and staring at him. Panic flooded their faces as they registered his Sharingan…as they realized who he was. He stood perfectly still, Sharingan blazing and with Susanoo around him, his sword drawn.

"Sasu—!"

He felled all three in the same move. The one with lanky hair refused to look into his eyes. He died on Sasuke's sword. The other two did look, and he clobbered them with a Genjutsu so strong, a Genjutsu where they saw their own brutal deaths, that it rendered them both unconscious in seconds.

The children were crying. One was screaming.

Sasuke realized that blood was running freely from his blade.

At that moment, Hinata came in behind him, Shino's arm around her shoulder. She took one look around and her face drained of color.

"Rina was here," Sasuke said.

"Did she escape? Or was she—" She looked at the blood on Sasuke's blade, horror in her eyes.

One of the children, the oldest by the look of him—Itachi's age maybe—stammered out a response. "A…b…boy took her." He pointed. "That way."

"Stay here," Sasuke said to Hinata.

"I should come with you."

"Shino can't fight. Wall up this room. Wait for Naruto. I will get Rina."

Hinata didn't object, though maybe she wanted to. It was hard to tell with her. All he saw was her lips form a thin, worried line. Shino clearly needed medical aid, though. Perhaps he had a concussion. Or maybe he was poisoned.

Sasuke didn't wait to find out. He couldn't afford to keep waiting. He dashed out of the room, heading the direction the boy had pointed.

A boy took her.

It was that Genin he had spared. Not again.

Lucia's heart was beating. She focused on it. It was the only thing that made sense to her.

Gray didn't move. He faced her woodenly, like a statue.

"Itachi is fine, Lucia," Ino said to her. "There's no way the Grass could have assassinated him."

Lucia didn't need her to say more. There was always a way. Itachi had come to the battlefield.

What do I do? What can I do?

"There's a lot of Shinobi out there," Tenten murmured. She had her ear pressed to the door, her eyes closed. "Dozens and dozens."

"They're congregating their strongest here," Shikamaru said. "You would think we had something very valuable, and I don't think it's Gray." He cast a sidelong look at Lucia.

"Don't count on a peaceful resolution," Neji said. "We must prepare for a pitched battle, and hold somehow until Naruto comes."

Peace …

The word slipped through Lucia's thoughts like a satin ribbon from her fingers.

The Grass Jounin Gray was watching her beneath hooded eyes. He hadn't said a word to her since announcing that her children were targeted—both of them slotted to die today. She didn't have any further questions. She couldn't summon any meaningful arguments.

Even the thought that Marnix would win if she didn't do something fell out of her mind like a dead weight. Winning seemed irrelevant. Marnix seemed irrelevant. Being surrounded by Grass Shinobi seemed irrelevant.

She closed her eyes, feeling dizzy.

Peace.

She couldn't find it.

When she opened them, Gray was still staring at her.

A tough man, she thought *. A man who has made tough choices and now faces a tough fate* .

A familiar feeling. She saw Itachi Uchiha in Gray. She saw herself. She saw her father, and her mother, and now her son and daughter.

Tough.

"LUCIA."

The sound of her name boomed throughout the room. She tensed up immediately. It was Marnix's voice, echoing hollowly. Some kind of

jutsu? The Leaf Shinobi looked around, so it couldn't just be in her mind, though the sound pounded in her skull as if it were.

"Lucia," Marnix repeated, this time in a quieter voice. His tone was mild, almost silky. "Lucia, Lucia, this is futile. You must know it. You are a prisoner. All of your guards are hostages. You have no choice but to surrender."

She bit her lip.

Shikamaru was shaking his head at her. *Buy time* , he mouthed.

She nodded.

"Rina," she said. "Bring her to me. I want to see her."

"You know I don't have to do that," Marnix told her. "Unless seeing her corpse will make her cooperate faster?"

The words hit her in the chest like a rock. She covered her hand with her mouth, swallowing the urge to heave. Rina… He really meant what he said. They might be dispatching her daughter now. Her emotions railed against it, clawing at the inside of her chest like living things that were suffocating from the logic she forced upon them. Why shouldn't Marnix kill Rina? He had Lucia in his grasp and it was her and her knowledge that he wanted. Rina was meant to be a lure and had served her purpose. Now she was nothing to him but a potential heir who might one day cause him problems, as was Itachi.

She couldn't talk about it without weeping. It was effort to speak without screaming. She changed topics. "Where is Lady Romjin?"

"That addled old bag?" Marnix laughed. "They thought sending her would keep me in line. She's old, though, confused. She sits in a room alone these days, staring at shadows on the wall."

Lucia knew Lady Romjin. She was a mean spirited old woman, hard and brittle at the same time, like an old bone. She hated everyone

and everything, but she was not confused. "She's not addled."

"She is now," Marnix said pleasantly.

Lucia wondered exactly what he had done to the old woman. Had his loyal Grass Shinobi hounds put her under Genjutsu, those that made up the leadership in this village now? Mixed up Romjin's mind until she couldn't tell up from down? As her age was considerable, it wasn't implausible for him to return her to the Romjin family with regrets that she her brains had gone soft during their travels. He might even just dump her body and claim she died of heart failure.

And no wonder. If Lady Romjin was here to keep Marnix in check, she was a burr in Marnix's side. Lucia could imagine their conversations. The old lady would be focused on the goal: to discover the whereabouts of Lucia's inheritance and get it back, while Marnix would be seduced by all the possibilities for power in this land. For all her cantankerousness, Lady Romjin did not harbor foolishness and would have created considerable trouble for Marnix if she soured on his methods with the Grass.

"What about Gehard?" she asked. "I was under the impression that the negotiation would be with my husband. Did you kill him?"

"You would like that, wouldn't you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

He laughed. "Gehard is rethinking his loyalties."

So not dead then, but in no position to help himself, much less do any good for her or her children, if such a thing were even to occur to him.

Shikamaru was watching her and nodding slow, silent encouragement. She could feel the seconds dragging out. She knew they were on borrowed time. The Shinobi on the other wall were not standing around idly. What else could she say to stall the inevitable?

"What is this all for?" she asked. "Money?"

"Money is just a tool, Lucia. You know that."

She did. She looked again at Gray, thinking about what she had said to him to make him speak, and then started thinking about the other Grass Shinobi on the other side of the door. Could they hear this conversation? Were they all of the same mind about this? She had never met a group of people who were.

"For Gehard," she answered. "It *is* about money. I know him well. For you, I think it is about power."

"And for you," Marnix said, his voice surprisingly pleasant.

"And for me," she agreed. "But what will you do with your power, I wonder?" She projected her voice, hoping she was heard through the walls. "More of what you've already done, I suspect."

She didn't have to guess how awful that was. She had seen it. The Grass—some of them, at least—must have some idea.

Do you want more of it? All of you?

"And you would do more of what you have done, I suppose?" Marnix asked. "Tell me, Lucia. Tell me now. What will *you* do with your father's legacy?"

"I will build an empire," Lucia said.

There was an eerie silence. And then the wall exploded. The sound was so loud that pain shot through her skull from her ear.

Grass Shinobi came pouring in. Dust was everywhere, but through the swirls she could see the glint of steel.

We're going to die , she thought.

But her guards—the Leaf Shinobi—moved like lightning. They formed a wall in front of her, blocking the assault. She saw Ino's ponytail, swaying behind her back, and Shikamaru, kneeling on the ground, Neji with the white eyes held his hands out, and Tenten, brandishing a scroll from behind her back.

Behind them, through the dust and behind the Grass Shinobi, she saw Marnix. His face was red, livid with rage.

No , she thought with heart-wrenching pain. *These Leaf will die for me.*

And I will live to die like my mother.

The world was different. It was the same, but it looked different to Itachi.

He stared at it with two working Sharingan eyes. He stared right into the face of the Grass Jounin named Juo, whose eyes were so heavily made up that they looked like the empty sockets of a skull. He was pretty sure that this man was here to kill him.

He stared at Yukio, wrapped in Juo's chakra, screaming.

He didn't have to think about what to do or how to do it. He knew. He knew Juo's jutsu as well as any of his own.

Just like that. Just by looking at it. That's amazing.

No wonder the Uchiha were feared.

Juo's Snake in the Grass jutsu was made of lightning chakra, just like his techniques, but it was formed differently and released differently. Itachi copied all of it. His hands moved through the signs, which he had memorized without trying to. The jutsu shot out from his feet, perfectly formed. It was a live current, slithering through the grass. It wrapped around Juo's feet, and it bit at his jutsu.

The snake around Yukio vanished.

Itachi darted in. He formed hand signs as he moved and released the lighting paralysis jutsu that Sakura had taught him just as Juo cancelled out his attack with another snake of his own. Itachi's lightning jutsu caught the Grass Jounin just as he looked up. His opponent froze.

That won't hold him long.

Yukio was lurching to his feet, stumbling unsteadily, but he was up. Itachi grabbed his arm and pulled.

"Where?" Yukio mumbled. His breathing sounded wheezy.

Back.

Itachi tugged and Yukio followed. They scrambled back the way they had come, away from the gaping maw in the earth that led to the Grass underground.

Tadashi, the other Grass Jounin, was just where Itachi had left him—surrounded by the Leaf Genin and seeming to take his sweet time "getting rid" of them. All four of the Genin were together. Haro had raised an earth wall and Amaya was throwing shuriken at Tadashi from behind it, each one exploding with a blinding flash that seemed to infuriate the Jounin if not injure him. Michiko, he was relieved to see, had regained consciousness. One of Haro's slugs was attached to her neck and seemed to be doing some kind of reverse leeching judging by the color that had returned to her cheeks. All of them looked exhausted.

"Itachi!" Amaya shouted, seeing him and Yukio crest the hill. She saw his Sharingan and gasped. "Your eye!"

Tadashi turned his head, eyes widening as he and Yukio ran down the little knoll of grass toward the others. The Grass Jounin roared, formed hand signs, and pounded his fist into the earth. Itachi's

Sharingan automatically copied the jutsu, but doing so didn't prepare him to handle the result.

The earth split.

Itachi felt the shudder through the soles of his feet and all the way up his spine. It was like Sakura's attack, but…deeper. The earth between Tadashi and the four Genin ruptured. It was the same sound he had heard before—a boom like an explosion. Michiko screamed, scrambling back with Jumei from a fissure that opened beside the pair of them. Haro fell forward on his face, his rock wall crumbling to nothing. Amaya lost her balance and collapsed.

Itachi gathered lightning chakra. Beside him, Yukio pulled the shadow cloak over his body. As Tadashi rose, Itachi unleashed the paralysis jutsu.

For such an enormous man, Tadashi was quick. He dodged, grinning as he sprang. He brandished a chain sickle as he sailed through the air and right over Haro's wall. Itachi knew that if that thing touched any of them, it would be split their bodies into pieces. But Tadashi didn't touch them. The man landed into the midst of the Genin. His chain cracked against the ground.

Where he landed, the earth exploded.

Itachi couldn't believe what he saw. The earth beneath the feet of his friends was draining away into some kind of massive sink hole. Tadashi leapt free of it, still grinning. Feeling sick with horror, Itachi watched as Haro sank out of sight, buried in rock and sand. Amaya followed him, screaming and scrambling uselessly for purchase. Seconds later her words were cut off as her chin, and then her nose, and then the top of her head vanished under the sand. Michiko and Jumei were just ahead of the worse of it, both of them grabbing at rocks and tufts of grass, but Itachi could see that they were not going to make it. The sink hole was expanding faster than they could run. Before Tadashi landed, the rocks were slipping out from Michiko's feet and she was falling…

Yukio darted ahead and leapt into the air, right over the sink hole, right at Tadashi, who—incredibly—was still airborne.

"Yukio!" Itachi shouted. "Wait!"

But Yukio was not one to wait.

He saw the flash of steel as Yukio whipped a kunai out from his sleeve. Tadashi was watching his handiwork, still grinning, when that sliver of a blade struck him just above the heel.

Itachi didn't know what to do. His friends were buried. They couldn't have much air, their mouths full of dirt, screaming as they went under.

It was instinct more than thought. He jumped into the sink hole, right in the middle, and expelled Tadashi's jutsu that he had copied.

I might kill them, he thought as he fell. *I might save them.*

His Sharingan knew, even if he didn't. The jutsu wasn't an explosion, not really. The jutsu moved earth, pushing it down, breaking it apart. Itachi didn't have much ability with earth element, but this jutsu didn't actually require it. It used the tectonic energy already inherent in the earth's crust. He had seen it, though he only really understood it as he performed it.

I can move the earth , he thought as his hand connected.

And the earth moved.

He felt Yukio land somewhere beside him just before the ground gave way, shifting under him, dropping everything…and everyone… deeper. Dirt came piling down on top of his head, blocking out the light of the sun. And below his feet were falling…falling.

Let me be right , he thought. *Or I'm dead. There are tunnels under us. If we can get that far down…*

He stopped falling. But he wasn't in a tunnel. He wasn't anywhere. He couldn't see. He was buried. Buried alive. Automatically, frantically, he started digging. His hands scooped at the soil around him. He grabbed at roots. He pushed rocks and mulch and dirt anywhere he could, fighting down panic. His clothes were filthy. There was dirt in his eyes. There was no light. There was air, but that would run out soon enough. He kept his mouth closed and kept digging.

"Itachi!"

A voice. His heart leapt. It sounded far away, but he heard it. Not impossibly far.

"Itachi!"

He recognized it. Amaya's voice! Was she nearby? He dug toward it, worming with his shoulders now, grateful that the soil around him was loose enough to move.

He was vaguely aware that he was hurting. Falling had hurt him. But the desperation he felt was too strong to focus on it.

"Itachi!"

The voice was closer, louder. How far? It was getting more difficult to move, more difficult to breathe.

Abruptly, hands came through the soil from somewhere beside him. He felt them grasp him by the leg and arm. Suddenly, he was being pulled sideways. The earth was getting looser. He could see light. He could smell fresh air.

He tumbled out the side of wall, coughing and choking.

Someone smacked his back. Haro, he saw, covered in grime but alive. And Amaya was looking him over, her face covered in dirt, her hair a ruin. Michiko was behind her with Jumei, and Yukio…Yukio

was leaning against another wall, still wheezing, though his eyes were on Itachi.

" 'Eat dirt' just took on new meaning for me," Haro coughed. "Did we win or lose that?"

"We're alive," Amaya breathed. "So I say we won."

"Where's the Jounin?" Itachi gasped. "Did he follow us down?"

"I cut his Achilles tendon," Yukio said. His breathing seemed a little better. "To go with the toe I stabbed before. He's not going to follow us down. Not right away."

"Juo will," Itachi said, and tried to get up. His knees wobbled. His ankle complained. He had twisted it when he fell. He limped uncertainly. "And this is…"

He looked around.

They were in the Grass underground.

The ceiling above them and the wall beside him was a mess, but the rest of the tunnel seemed to be in perfect order. There were sconces on the wall with torches burning brightly along wide paths that four people could walk down abreast.

"We should find a way out," Amaya said. "Or at least move. Those Jounin will find us if we stay here."

Itachi couldn't argue with that, though his first couple of steps confirmed that he would be walking with a limp.

This is bad , he thought, though he didn't say it out loud. They were in the enemy stronghold. They were untried Genin, injured, with no leadership. And they had no idea where they were or which way to go.

They made a pathetic, dirty bunch as they hobbled down the tunnel, nursing injuries as they walked, moving as quickly as his ankle would allow. He felt guilty about that. He seemed to be the only one with a foot injury and it wasn't safe to walk this slowly. Fortunately, they didn't run into anybody and the Jounin assassins did not appear. He wondered what was keeping them.

Eventually they came to a fork. He wasn't sure which way to go, but the right fork seemed less well lit, which might mean it was less populated. For them, that was a good thing, so they went right.

They walked for ten, maybe fifteen minutes, in complete silence. That was why he heard it.

A scream.

He stopped dead.

It was a girl's voice. He'd recognize that voice anywhere.

"Rina?" he said aloud. He turned fully in a circle. He couldn't tell where the scream had come from.

Was this a trick?

"It was that way," Michiko said, pointing to another fork ahead of them. This one led down.

"Are you sure?" Haro asked her.

"Positive."

Itachi knew it was stupid to follow the voice. Rina wouldn't be alone. She would be surrounded by Grass probably. It might be a trap. Some kind of Genjutsu…. But…

He hobbled toward the tunnel, and picked up his pace as he went, ignoring the screaming pain in his ankle. It was dark and drafty. He could feel a wind on his face, even though that didn't seem to make

sense as he was definitely descending. He could hear the others following him.

He heard the scream again, and then a sob.

"Rina!" he screamed.

His voice reverberated alarmingly off the walls.

I will draw them all right to us!

There was a moment of silence. And then…

"Itachi! ITACHI!"

He broke into a run, loping a little as his ankle pained him with every footfall, but running just the same. The others followed.

The tunnel wound down down down, twisting and turning so that he had to watch himself in spite of his panic. It got narrower too, so narrow in places that his hands were touching the walls on either side of him and they all had to move single file. The walls were no longer soft dirt. They were hard rock and the rock was sweating with moisture. How far underground were they? It would have been more nerve wracking if he wasn't somewhat comforted by the thought that someone as big as Tadashi wouldn't fit.

This is not a regularly used tunnel , he thought. *We are going somewhere strange.*

Eventually, he found the end of it. He broke out of the tunnel into an open cavern and discovered that he had barely been in a tunnel at all. It looked more like a crack in the wall. He backed away, making room for the others, and almost stumbled right over a cliff.

He felt the give beneath his heel and stopped, turning.

There were torches here too, but only a few, barely enough to see by. He was standing on a ledge that ran lengthwise beside an

enormous naturally-formed underground fissure that seemed to stretch forever. The fissure was ten, maybe twelve feet across at the narrowest point he could see. And the depth… He didn't know how far it went down. There seemed to be no end to it.

"Itachi!"

He looked up.

On the other side of the fissure, so close, was Rina. Her face was pale in the torchlight, her cheeks streaming with dirt and tears.

She wasn't alone. She was being held by a boy, a boy about his age, maybe a year older, wearing a Grass headband. He had his arm locked around her throat, but Itachi couldn't stop thinking that he looked like he was about to push her off the cliff.

Did he bring her here to kill her? he wondered. It seemed obvious, but he couldn't wrap his mind around it. Why? Maybe pushing a little girl into an abyss was easier than stabbing her? The boy looked to be about his own age. Not a child.

Strange how my thoughts have changed.

The other Leaf Genin piled out the tunnel behind him.

The Grass Genin took one look at them—at all six of them—and turned, hauling Rina with him, his arm wrapped around her neck. He pulled her kicking and screaming through an opening in the wall on the other side of the fissure, returning the way he must have come.

Itachi sprinted to the precipice, ignoring the agony in his foot. The gap was ten feet across. Maybe eleven. Twelve? The closer he got, the wider it seemed and the more his ankle hurt.

He couldn't make that even if his ankle was fine.

I have to.

The gap yawned before him, dropping into an abyss below. He calculated the distance, factoring in the incline, the rate at which it was widening, and the fact that his legs were shaking, his lungs burning, and Rina was screaming…

No one can make that.

"Itachi," Amaya said, her voice breathless but urgent. She grabbed his arm. "Don't! We'll find a way around!"

Hot, frustrated tears welled up in his eyes. "They'll kill her! He'll slit her throat."

A blur of motion shot passed him.

"Yukio!" Haro bellowed. "Don't be crazy!"

Itachi watched it happen and still could scarcely believe it. Yukio shot toward the fissure like a bullet. He didn't even seem to look at it. He didn't think about it at all. He just leapt.

Itachi's breath caught in his throat. Darkness yawned beneath Yukio, deep and wide, but his legs moved like the arms of a windmill in mid-air, reaching for the opposite side like hands. He sailed effortlessly over the chasm. He landed on the opposite lip with a thud that echoed through the chamber, knees bent to absorb the impact, and rolled forward from the force of his trajectory. He came out of it in a crouch, his hands touching the ground beside him, his clothes covered with fresh dirt.

"Holy shit," Haro said. "He made it. I can't believe he made that."

Itachi stared across the chasm, right into Yukio's eyes.

Yukio got up.

"Yukio, don't go alone!" Michiko shouted.

"I have to!" Yukio shouted back. "Find another way around!"

Itachi could feel Michiko's fright as Yukio turned, his figure blurring as he donned the shadow cloak, sprinting after Rina and the boy.

Amaya wastugging on his arm. "Come on, Itachi. We can't do anything from here. We have to find a way around. Come on!"

Itachi nodded unsteadily.

As a group, they ran along the ledge, looking for a way across the chasm. Eventually they hit a wall. At no point was the jump any narrower. But on the left of the dead end there was a staircase going up the opposite way. They took it. It wound round and round and eventually led to another tunnel that then forked into two tunnels.

"Which way?" he asked Amaya.

"I don't know," Haro muttered. "I'm lost."

"The right tunnel?" Amaya said. "Oh, Itachi, I don't really know."

Michiko was leaning in toward Jumei, listening to something the boy was saying under his breath.

"He thinks it's the left," she said. "Something about the structure of the tunnels and the architecture and how they must be carved to avoid collapse…" Jumei whispered something else, urgently, or perhaps objectionably. "Oh, I don't think he cares about *how* they carve it," Michiko interrupted him. "If you think it's the way around, I'm all for it!"

"Let's go," Itachi decided. "The left tunnel."

Michiko scouted ahead, darting down the tunnel Jumei had indicated, red hair flowing behind her like flame. Itachi followed. The others followed him.

Itachi's heart was pounding so hard it was difficult to make sense of anything, but gradually he became aware of sounds echoing through the tunnels.

"It sounds like a battle," Amaya whispered.

They never saw anything. The sounds seemed to be coming through the ceiling from tunnels above them that they couldn't see.

"Go right," Jumei said when they came to the next fork.

Michiko took it and Itachi's team followed, with Jumei bringing up the rear.

The tunnels became cooler. The torches along the walls thinned out. They went through one patch in complete darkness, only to appear at another fork. The right-most tunnel led down a staircase.

We'll never find a way out , Itachi realized. *Even if we find Rina…*

Nevertheless, they took the staircase going down. At the bottom, Itachi had to slow to a walk to catch his breath, but only for a moment, and then they were running again.

Rina , he thought. *I'm coming, I swear!*

Michiko screamed, giving him a second of warning before he emerged into the next room.

They had run right into a swarm of Grass Shinobi.

Rina's head was *pounding* . Her heart was racing.

She pulled away from the Grass Genin boy with all her might, weeping, but he was stronger. He kicked her feet out from under her and grabbed her by the hair.

"Itachi! Itachi!" she screamed whenever she got the chance, wrenching away the hand wrapped around her mouth and shrieking at the top of her lungs.

The boy tried to pull her up, but she fought him, staying on her knees no matter how hard he yanked on her hair.

She knew it was stupid. She knew it was only a matter of time before the boy just killed her.

But he hadn't yet. He hadn't.

The boy hauled her onward, kicking and screaming.

Why was she so *useless* ?

Back in Konoha, she had been starting to feel…almost arrogant.

She remembered when she discovered it, and the feeling of power and superiority it gave her.

Twelve notes in the chromatic scale. Twelve hand signs. Could one substitute the other? That was the thought she had stumbled across while wandering around Konoho hour after hour, thinking about music, missing music, and studying jutsu. It was a staggering revelation. Could she match notes to hand signs? If she could create a proper working code, it would mean that any jutsu could be *played* . *Any* jutsu. As an experiment, she had written lots of jutsus down, all she had managed to observe in secret, coding them into strings of notes and writing them down in her journal.

The result was that she remembered them all—every jutsu she had seen in the Leaf while spying on the Shinobi sparring. Songs were easy to remember, much easier than random sequences. But it still wasn't as good as having a Sharingan. It wasn't as fast, and knowing the sequence of hand signs was not enough to produce the jutsu. She needed to be able to see and understand how the chakra was worked into the handsigns to do that. But learning to read handsigns like reading music enabled her to guess what was *coming* . She could usually tell if it a jutsu would be completed correctly too, the same way she knew if a song was being played correctly. Watching Shinobi train, she found herself able to predict the fight and

accurately guess, most of the time, who would win. She had known that Itachi botched the Chidori in his fight with Yukio before Itachi did. Watching that had been like a knife to her heart. Her fault. She taught him wrong. But that didn't matter now.

I didn't mean to. I just wanted to belong. No, I wanted to be different.

Which?

She wasn't physically strong. Maybe she would never be much good at Taijutsu, but she would be *fast* at Ninjutsu. She could play a string of notes much, much faster than she could form signs with her hands. She could play faster than *anyone* could form signs with their hands. And her jutsu could be much, *much* more complicated. Why, she might even be able to *link* jutsu, to create a *pattern* -verse, chorus, bridge-sustained in an unbroken flow for as long as her chakra held out. She needed to work it out, of course. She needed to practice, but if she could get it right, what *couldn't* she do? What couldn't she *create* ?

Foolish girl. She had thought she could conquer the world. She didn't even know how to hold a kunai the right way.

She may never get the chance now to learn.

The Grass boy set her down. They were in a deserted cave-like room, somewhere deep in the catacombs. There was only one opening, the one they had come through. It was silent all around. The boy had a knife out. She knew what that meant. One of his gloved hands held the knife to her throat.

"It just takes a cut, but I'll go deep. I'll make it clean. You'll barely feel it. I promise."

It was the first thing he had said to her.

She looked at him through tears. She could barely make out his face. All of her muscles were shaking. She could barely move. But

she didn't cry. She just looked at him, tears running down her cheeks.

The Grass Genin boy hesitated. He didn't want to kill her. She could see it in his face. He brought her here to kill her, because it was expected. He would do it. He was bracing himself to do it. But he didn't want to.

The longer he hesitated, though, the more his hands started to tremble. The hand clenching the kunai was ghostly pale. He kept checking his grip, peeling his fingers away from the hilt one by one as if each was sticky or clammy. Rina said nothing. Her heart was beating like the wings of a hummingbird. She could scarcely think. All of her muscles were clenched tight. She knew only one thing:

I don't want to die.

She didn't say a word.

The Genin's eyes hardened. His grip on the kunai tightened. He moved his arm.

She shut her eyes instinctively, as if not watching her own death would somehow soften it. Tears gushed from her eyes.

The blow never came.

The distinct "ping" sound of one kunai hitting another rang in her ears. An instant later, she felt the looming presence of the boy vanish.

Her eyes flew open. Warmth spread through her heart, the warmth of hope, of love, of gratitude for second chances. Tears streamed from her eyes. She dashed them away.

She was rescued.

"Ita-!"

But it wasn't.

Her call fell short. She knew this boy, her rescuer, but it wasn't Itachi.

She rose up on her knees, but could not do more. Where before every muscle in her body had been clenched tightly, now she felt like jelly from head to toe. She couldn't get up. Her legs felt drained of blood and energy. And she felt sick to her stomach. But she had a voice. She *had* one. So she shouted. She shouted encouragement with everything she had left.

"Yukio!"

Yukio didn't acknowledge her, but he must have heard. He faced off against the other boy. They were both taijutsu fighters, and sized each other up instantly. Yukio shifted back and forth on the balls of his feet, testing his opponent's agility. Then he went in for a hit, jumping high, his kick perfectly extended, his center of gravity not an inch out of balance. The other boy matched him, though, and dodged. Both of their blades were out. The Grass Genin darted in. Yukio evaded, side stepping him, turning about.

They were equally matched, neither one was giving the other reprieve for a ninjutsu. Rina kept both eyes open. She knew she had to watch. Anything she could do…to shout or throw something….

She had no trouble following the battle.

He's going to undercut you , she thought, just before the Grass Genin ducked Yukio's punch and twisted under his defenses to aim a quick jab at Yukio's center. A warning wasn't needed, though. The Shadow Cloak shifted and Yukio evaded, dancing backward. The Grass Genin followed, all kicks now, his feet landing blows that Yukio blocked with both forearms or rolled and twisted to avoid.

She wished she still had her piccolo. She wished she had anything. A rock. A pebble. Without taking her eyes off the fight, she scrounged in the dirt for something, anything, until her hands were a stinging,

dirty mess. Everything she found was too small. She knew none of it would fly true, and she feared to take her eyes off the fight for even a second to find something better.

Both boys were sweating. Both boys were watching the other, chest heaving, eyes focused.

But then the Grass Genin made a mistake.

She saw it as it happened. The kunai came awkwardly into the boy's hands, slipping in his grip.

It was almost imperceptible, barely a mistake at all. But that was all it took.

Yukio didn't hesitate. That was the difference between them, she saw. Yukio didn't reflect. He didn't pause with concern. He didn't hesitate as the Grass Genin had hesitated when he failed to kill her just minutes ago. He didn't hesitate the way he didn't hesitate when he took out Itachi's eye at the match. His motions were smooth, like oiled clockwork. He saw his opponent make a mistake. And his reaction was instant. He knocked the kunai out of the other boy's wrist, locked his hand in place with his free hand, and dragged his own blade across the Genin's neck from ear to ear.

Blood blossomed from the Grass Genin's throat. It took only the amount of time it would take to draw one breath. There was no sound. Red spilled down the Genin's chest, soaked his mesh shirt, covered the hands that reactively grabbed for the wound. Life went out of him just as fast. The body toppled. Seconds went by, though it seemed much longer.

Yukio stood perfectly still. The Shadow Cloak fell off of him. His strength seemed to go with it. And his expression…

He dropped the bloody kunai. But then he knelt immediately, picking it back up. He didn't seem to know what to do with it now. He turned in a slow circle, his eyes darting to the door, bounded to the body of

the boy he had killed, then to Rina, and then back to the door. He wandered first one way, then another, all in complete silence.

"Yukio," Rina croaked. She tried to get up, but her legs would not support her. She felt tears coming, overwhelming her words. "Itachi?"

"He's okay," Yukio said, as if her call had anchored him. He moved toward her.

As he approached, he seemed to realize that he was carrying a knife covered in blood. He stared at it, then at her, and flushed. He scrubbed the blade on his shirt and then put it back in its holster. When he looked up, there were tears in his eyes, though he didn't seem aware of them.

"Yukio?" she said. "You're crying."

"I am?" Yukio blinked at her and the motion caused a tear rolled down his cheek. It startled him. He dashed it away, looking surprised. He glanced away from her. He scrubbed his eyes to clear them, but it seemed to have the opposite effect. More tears followed. His shoulders started shaking. "Don't…"

It was several moments before he was able to speak.

When the tears stopped, he raised his head. His expression was haunting. He stared at her, right into her soul. "You can't…You won't tell anybody this."

She shook her head, and just kept shaking it. "I won't. I won't tell."

She wouldn't. She really wouldn't.

Yukio swallowed. Then he swallowed again, grimacing, as if his throat were dry.

It was then that she noticed that there was a cut on his cheek.

When did that happen?

It must have been a lucky hit when Yukio was under the Shadow Cloak.

Rina felt her stomach heave. "You're cut."

And suddenly she knew.

He said it would take just a cut. No… No no no.

Yukio looked up and saw it on her face. He scrubbed the cut awkwardly. "It's okay," he said hastily, shaking his hands at her. "Don't worry. It's just a little nick. I'm strong. It will be okay."

But it's poison. You must feel it.

She could see redness around the cut, and his face was pale. His cheeks were trembling. He shrugged his shoulders as if they were stiff.

Nevertheless, he came toward her, walking normally, almost a stroll. At least until he got to the wall. He leaned against it and slumped slowly down.

Rina didn't say anything. For several moments, Yukio didn't either. Neither of them moved.

Yukio's gaze slowly swiveled toward the body on the ground. He looked immediately away again, tilting his head up to stare at the ceiling, his legs stretched out in front of his. He closed his eyes. His body become still. There were no tears this time.

So Rina started crying. The tears just wouldn't stop.

Yukio's eyes open again. "Hey," he said again. "They're not far behind. You're going to be rescued."

She only cried harder.

"Hey hey," he said, and turned his head slightly. "Stop it. I'm serious."

He said it the way Itachi would say it, like she was being annoying. She stopped.

His expression sobered a little. "Listen," he said. "I want to tell you something."

She listened. She was *always* listening.

"I heard you ran away because you thought you had something to do with Itachi losing his eye at the match." He looked at her, forehead sweaty, blue eyes shining. He licked his lips. "That pisses me off."

She didn't speak. But she felt… relieved.

Please. Please yell at me. I hate what I did.

"I mean, I know you're sensitive and all, but that's just stupid. Don't think things like that. Don't do things like that. People don't like it. They don't want to worry about you. And no Shinobi wants some little girl to shoulder blame for their actions. I chose to hate Itachi when he showed up here. That's just…well it's what I did and it has nothing to do with you. I saw your brother as the enemy from the day I laid eyes on him, and that's all me. It's got nothing to do with you. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"I'd change it if I could," he added, leaning his head back against the wall. "Not that that matters really now, but just so you know. I'd fix it if I got the chance."

I would…if I got the chance…

She started to tremble. Yukio was definitely sweating now, and it wasn't from exertion any longer. His skin seemed pallid, and she noticed that the muscles in his face were tense, as if they were locking up. The fingers on his hands were twitching.

He opened one eye and saw her looking.

"Do you want to hold my hand?"

She didn't, but it occurred to her that he might want her to, so she took it, even though there was blood on it and it was covered in dirt.

He smiled at her again. "There." He squeezed her hand. "Feel that?"

She nodded. It hurt. He squeezed hard.

"That's how strong I am," he told her. "I'm amazing, right? You know it. Everyone knows it. So just… you hold my hand, okay? You hold it and don't let go until Itachi gets here."

So she held his hand, squeezing his fingers, watching his face. Periodically, he squeezed back. She waited, eyes on the door. Itachi didn't come. Sasuke didn't come. She squeezed Yukio's hand again. He didn't squeeze back.

"Yukio?" she whispered. He didn't answer. "Yukio? YUKIO!"

Naruto hated waiting. It was agonizing.

Come on, Sasuke. Give me a sign.

He sat cross-legged on a boulder in the middle of a glen. He sat unmoving, like a toad, his hands on his knees. Trees blocked his view of the Grass Village in the valley, though the smoke rising into the sky above told him it was still burning.

He was surrounded by Leaf Shinobi. They milled around him, weapons at the ready, looking restless, acting nervous, though only another Shinobi would pick up on it.

In Sage Mode, his senses picked up on subtleties he might otherwise not notice. One of the Chuunin, a boy named Gado,

whispered to one of the Jounin, "Isn't the Lord Hokage going to order the attack?"

The same question was asked by someone every few minutes. The Grass Village—the part that was visible in the valley anyway—would be a pile of cinders before much longer. Sasuke would have found a way to their underground by now. He'd be rampaging through the real village.

If he kills too many of them, we'll never get out of a war.

What were his choices? He could order the attack. Maybe he could do it without killing too many of the Grass. Maybe he wouldn't lose many of his own people in the Grass's defense and retaliation. Maybe. That was unrealistic, though. He didn't know where his people were and the Grass would be ready for them, trying to block them at every step.

What was his other choice? He could wait. What if the Grass panicked and killed Rina? That seemed fairly likely. What if they killed Lucia and the Shinobi with her? Tenten, Ino, Neji, Shikamaru… No, he couldn't allow that. But to kill the Grass first…was that really the only option? There had to be a third choice. There had to be. There always was. He could delay a little, trying to find it. But not for too much longer.

Give me a sign.

A commotion caught his attention.

There was some excitement in the ranks. Someone was pushing through.

News?

He raised his head. The Shinobi stepped aside.

A Jounin emerged from behind the lines. It was Sachio Satou—Amaya's father. Naruto felt surprise. The man was a captain. He had been sent to keep watch on the Grass Shinobi that had surfaced when Sasuke infiltrated the village. They were not to engage unless forced. Sachio was one who always followed orders to the letter.

But Sachio had a captive with him. It was a girl, skinny like a fawn, with dirt on her face and a Grass forehead protector around her neck. She was a year or two younger than his own daughter.

Naruto sat up as the Leaf parted to let them through.

"A Grass Genin?" someone muttered.

Is this a retaliation? Naruto wondered. *A child for a child?*

"She came to us," Sachio announced, as if guessing his thoughts. "Emerged out the bracken like a rabbit. There are tunnels everywhere."

Naruto noticed that the girl was not restrained. She lifted her head and he found himself staring into a pair of green eyes framed by long strands of dirty blonde hair. Her eyes were yellow-green, like twin peridots, the color of sunlight on the leaves at dawn.

"She is unarmed," Sachio said. "Threw down her weapons the moment she laid eyes on me."

Sachio tossed a sack at Naruto's feet. It contained shuriken, twine, and an array of explosive powders. A Genin's tools. The girl did not look at them. She stood perfectly still.

"She said she wanted to speak to the Hokage," Sachio said.

The Grass Genin looked him in the eye. She was not afraid. There was fire in that gaze.

This isn't a surrender, Naruto thought *. She didn't come here to be a captive.*

"Why are you here?" Naruto asked her. "Do you bring a message from the Grass leaders?"

"My name is Saiya," Saiya said. "I have no messages. I am here of my own will. I have a request of Naruto Uzumaki, the Hokage."

"I am Naruto Uzumaki," Naruto said softly, "I am the Hokage."

"Lord Hokage, why have you not invaded? You *must* invade. You *must* take the village. Subdue everyone. Kill our leaders."

Naruto stared at her, aghast. He wasn't the only one.

The Leaf around him began to mutter darkly. Saiya was not immune to the mutterings. She knew she must sound like a traitor, asking for her own people to be put down. She kept her eyes on him, though.

"Lord Hokage, this…this is not the Grass. This is not the Grass I know."

There was silence in the glen.

"My village has fallen under a curse. We have always been poor. We scrape by on the scraps left by the larger villages. Now gold flows like water, but it has poisoned us. Lord Hokage, there is a sickness in my village, a madness. My sister, once regarded as a fine Chuunin, has been given to this outsider who doles out gold for favors as a toy. And he…" She swallowed, and didn't finish.

She didn't need to. Naruto felt instant rage.

"Lord Hokage, we are ruled by our strongest and our greediest, not our wisest. But it will not last. There is talk of rebellion. It will not be long before blood is shed and the clans turn against each other. Grass Shinobi will soon kill Grass Shinobi. Please, Lord Hokage, I have none of your strength, but I have heard of it. It is said that you can level mountains, but also that you can turn killers into brothers. I beg of you-"

She dropped to her knees and lifted her head. Her cheeks were stained with tears.

"Save the Grass."

TBC.

Two or three chapters left. **It is now that special time….to leave a review** ! Do you need help? I love any and all comments, but here are some prompts if it helps you:

1. Sakura and Kakashi – well now you know what happened to them. What do you think?

2. Lucia and the fate of the Leaf Shinobi with her—it might get ugly. Thoughts?

3. Itachi and team, fighting above and now trapped below.

4. Dear, sweet Rina, her music, her fate…and a dying Yukio. Love all thoughts about Yukio.

5. Naruto and Saiya's appeal…what do you think he will do?

6. How did you find this story and why did you decide to read it?

THANK YOU

Thank you to everyone who reviewed the last chapter…way back when I posted it. If you forgot, here's who you are: Alowl, Charisasori, PastaSentient, Three-Steps-Behind, shkh4ever, korraphilia, FriedIce, ghiblifan4life, Darkness9825, Inara Seraph, Nitramy, MarveHero1610, Teirce, The Real Iggy, DamionKenley117, Nokito-chan, reality deviant, SASSfrasEND, greyisblack, Servant of Agape, ambergur-pyon96, ScreenSurfer, oxsilvermoonxo, Thisisirrelevant, Ylan, 00-night-eyes-00, 01Trycia-chan01, XxaoshixX, BukkakeNoJutsu, Nahmen, minniemousemon,

Anautumnlady, BiblioMatsuri, aspct, Noura, xyz, TheWizardMighty, dongaro, zackubernerdcondon, Soul of Sasuke, tordirycgoyust, exotic lady, Vbabeofhearts, 12-SmileyRose, Saika, T0FU, BloodyGoddess, Delbi18, Shaya10, kitsune2477, La Nuit Noire, AnonFan, shintsuki, hymnia, Jesse, Lorain, Sarah, ShadowKat14, Wed, .261, Squeaky Pickles, fall-into-life, Fiendfluyd, betweenwaters, Resisting the Borg, , Bee, cooldood101, XenotheWise135, Eri, Ekun-Asha, Gray's Wolves, Surugasasa, indelibility, Daisy0138, Layla, xxcandylover23xxx, Beautiful, Reyra, Coppervos, MelissaKS, Renata, Lucii, Kesshichan, CeliaSingsSongs

I've had a few reviews recently from new people. I imagine someone posted a recommendation of this story somewhere for that to have happened. Thank you to that person! The recent reviews helped me finish the story, and of course, I always enjoy getting feedback from new readers.

Thank you to everyone again for reading my story!

Chapter 25

Yeah. It's been 6 months and I've probably lost most of my readers. I am sorry. I could offer a long explanation, but suffice to say that I've not abandoned the story, and that I will finish the story. I appreciate your readership. To those who reviewed, and encouraged me to continue, thank you. Hopefully, there aren't too many mistakes.

White Rain

Chapter 25

By Zapenstap

Sakura and Kakashi reemerged at the site where they had been initially attacked. Sakura breathed deeply. They had been gone ten, maybe fifteen minutes, but things had changed.

One of the Grass Shinobi—the huge man named Tadashi—was on his knees, clutching a heel that was streaming with blood. As a medical-nin, Sakura knew a cut to a Achilles heel was a serious injury. Although a small, easily-forgotten part of the body, the tendon that connected heel to the hamstring was hugely important. When injured, a man could not walk. And Tadashi's had been severed completely.

The other Grass Jounin—Juo—was kneeling near his companion. Despite Tadashi's blood soaking the grass and bleeding out from beneath his fingers, the two were in conversation. Just beyond them, the waving grass field looked as if had been blasted by a meteor.

The Genin were nowhere to be seen.

"Easy," Kakashi said to her as fury erupted inside Sakura like a volcano. She had already clenched her fist, chakra forming in the palm of her hand. Kakashi was staring at the blasted earth with his Sharingan, analyzing it. "I don't think they were killed."

Juo noticed them and rose, turning to face them. He was an eerie one, Sakura decided, as cold as Zabuza, perhaps colder. His eyes, matted with dark makeup, showed no emotion.

"Where are my Genin?" Sakura demanded. She cracked her knuckles.

"Buried," Juo said.

Sakura's heart beat furiously in her chest.

"They're in the Grass underground," Kakashi said, Sharingan eye roving to the piles of freshly overturned earth. He looked up at Juo and smiled—evidenced by the narrowing of his eyes. "It seems they gave you some trouble," he said to the Grass Jounin.

Tadadshi grimaced. Juo said nothing. In response, he rose. His hand began forming signs.

"I've got this guy, Kakashi," Sakura said. "Leave him to me."

Kakashi assented by not objecting.

Sakura moved.

She was fast when she wanted to be. The suddenness of her onslaught startled both her opponents. Tadashi barely managed to roll out of the way, but she hadn't been aiming for him. It was Juo that she wanted to drop. He avoided a devastating punch by leaping backward, high into the air, and landing fifty yards away. At the same time, a rain of shuriken came flying at her head. A distraction. Sakura evaded, leaving a substitution to take the barrage and distract her attacker. Her assailant had ducked down among the grass. She crouched as well.

Slender blades of green rose around her on all sides. She knelt, feeling the earth beneath her fingers for vibrations that would tell her where her enemy was moving. He was light on his feet, but her

chakra sensory had become strong over the years. Yes, she thought she sensed something… there.

Just as she was about to move, a bolt of chakra lightning came wriggling through the grass toward her right side like a snake. It acted blind, but seemed to be able to sense her chakra. She darted, evading a bite to the heel, but in so doing, rustled the grass and exposed her location.

She retreated from the spot, and just in time.

Juo had more than one trick. He emerged where she had been, armed with a handful of needles. A shower of them hit the ground where she had been.

Those needles are poison most likely , Sakura thought as she turned and crouched, reading herself for attack, aware that she was more exposed now, as the grass was shorter here. She could probably take a hit from a few of those needles. She had become immune to most common poisons over the years, but she didn't want to risk it. The baby she carried might not be as resilient as she.

When the needles didn't strike, Juo did not waste time contemplating why. He caught onto her wuickly. He was moving again before she had time to rise. He came straight at her.

He doesn't know who he's dealing with, though , she thought, clenching her fist. Chakra surged into it. *I have to end this quickly* .

He was fast, covering ground nearly as quickly as Rock Lee, though not so impressively. He was slower than Sasuke, though. She made it look as if she was caught unprepared, as if she had barely escaped the needles. Inside, she smiled.

Juo, like most male Jounin, would assume he was stronger than she simply because he was heavier. In a direct confrontation, if he could get her to commit to taijutsu, he would have the upper hand. Typically, that was true. In almost any battle, size and strength made

a difference. But Sakura had spent a lifetime honing her gifts into sharp blades. She had more chakra control than anyone in the village. She had greater chakra reserves for replenishing medical jutsu than anyone in the village. And her strength—aided by her impressive chakra power and control—was simply unmatched.

Juo came at her with the force of a boulder falling from a mountain. She caught his fist in one hand as it came flying at her head. It came with enough force to shatter bone, but her chakra enveloped her hand and subdued that power by spreading it out over a much greater, invisible surface. Meanwhile, her other hand, also chakra-enforced, dealt a vicious blow to her opponent's right shoulder.

Sakura stayed her ground. Juo flew back ten paces.

Got him , she thought, rising slowly to her full height.

Juo was on the ground, but he was not dead. He was struggling to get up. If she and Kakashi could—

Sakura looked around.

Tadashi was on his feet. His ankle, though wounded, appeared to have been at attended to with some kind of chakra force to hold it together. He moved on it lightly, but he moved on it. Kakashi was watching him warily.

That was when the other two arrived—the woman with the fan and the Jounin with the dark, overlarge pupils. They appeared on top of the hill, breathing hard. They took one look at the situation, and descended together.

We're in a bit of trouble , Sakura thought.

It was four on two, and they were caught in the middle. She and Kakashi might be stronger that these Grass Jounin, maybe, but anything could go wrong. More importantly, she was conscious of the fact that she was carrying a baby. Though only a few weeks

pregnant, her ability to take injury was severely crippled. Not everything could be healed, not even with her vastly advanced medical jutsu.

I don't want to lose the baby.

It was a sobering thought, and in more ways than one.

Sasuke's baby. There was so much trouble to work out, and it was something she could not simply forget, or push away, or escape, not for the rest of her life, or her child's life, or Sasuke's life. She still hadn't definitively determined what she was going to do. She knew only that Sasuke wasn't ready and there was nothing she could do or say to make him ready. Her love for him, and even his love for her, withstanding all the uncertainty, all the anger, all the miscommunication, and everything else they felt and shared and suffered… those feelings and experiences, as beautiful as they were, simply weren't enough. In the end, Sasuke had not decided on her, and that was all there was to it.

It was impossible to deal with it now.

She knew only that she did not want to lose the baby.

Kakashi glanced at her. She was breathing heavily, sweat dripping from her brow. She knew he was thinking along similar lines, assessing her, assessing their opponents…all four of them.

The big one—Tadashi—moved first. Even with a bum foot, loosely stitched up by his teammate, he was a powerful force...and faster than he looked. He sprang into the air using only his good leg and a powerful burst of chakra, weapons glinting as they arced over his head.

Sakura formed hand signs for a substitution at the same time as Kakashi. They moved in opposite directions, leaving false targets behind. Sakura crouched in the tall grass, forming a second set of signs as Tadashi landed.

But the female Jounin had no patience for trickery. Her fan swung about her head. Sakura recognized the motion. Fire would follow, blowing out her cover.

And there was Juo, getting up, wincing in pain from her punch, but alive. He was forming the signs for his chakra snakes. And that other Jounin, the one with the dark eyes…he was preparing something too. That darkness jutsu?

Can we even hold them off? she wondered, feeling the first pangs of uncertainty.

It wasn't just that all opponents were formidable. It was that they were *coordinated* . They fought as a unit, as a group who had fought often together, well enough to anticipate one another's moves in advance.

She couldn't see Kakashi. But she didn't worry about him. She had no time to.

Flames were consuming the air between her and the enemy, chomping toward her from the kunoichi's fan, burning the grass to ashes as they went. Sakura was able to avoid being burned, leaping away and back again, but by the time she landed to safety, the tall grass on their battlefield—the only decent hiding place—was obliterated. Kakashi, likewise, emerged into the open, narrowly avoiding the last wave of flame. There was no break or pause to recover. Immediately following the flame came a dozen chakra snakes, striking from both sides and straight ahead. Sakura crouched, preparing to evade, and a counter attack of her own, when everything was swallowed by darkness.

Not this again!

She couldn't see the chakra snakes. Or the enemy. Or Kakashi. She couldn't see her own feet.

She moved anyway, having mentally charted the trajectory of the snakes. Her safest option was up.

A blow caught her against the shoulder. A second blow came as the ground hit her, or she hit it, with excruciating collision.

Tadashi , she thought through an explosion of pain that radiated through her arm and fanned across her entire body. His mace had glanced off her arm and knocked her to the ground. She couldn't think or move. She rolled up to her knees in the dirt, fingers digging into the ground as pain racked her. Vaguely, she heard Kakashi yell her name.

Tadashi would find her in seconds. Next, it would be her head. She had to move. From the sound of Kakashi's voice, he was too far to intervene.

"Gotcha."

Tadashi's voice. Right in her ear. Too slow.

I'm dead.

But a blow never fell.

Light bloomed.

She stared around her in amazement.

There was someone between her and Tadashi. Someone with a hand around Tadashi's wrist, glowing like the sun.

"Naruto?"

The darkness of the field was dissipating, growing patchy. Here she saw a bit of grass, then a bit of sky. It was like a film of dirt being rinsed away. The world reemerged, stainless and beautiful.

A thousand Narutos were streaming across the field. She turned on her knees, holding her injured shoulder, staring in wide-eyed amazement as a host of Senjuu-empowered clones spilled from the hills and into the valley, covering every patch of ground and moving with single-minded precision. There were other Leaf Shinobi amidst the throngs of Narutos. She recognized faces and the headbands of her friends, of the people of her village, but they were pockets of distinct Shinobi in a sea of Narutos. The Narutos weren't stopping for her, or the Grass Shinobi even—who stood stock still like deer caught in an avalanche—but poured continuously forth and disappeared into the horizon beyond.

They're attacking the Grass Village , she thought. They were going right into the heart of the village.

Rock Lee appeared at the top of the hill, spotted her on the ground, and ran toward her with a long legged sprint that ate up the ground beneath him. Kakashi reached her first. He knelt beside her, inspecting her shoulder with concern.

"It's okay," she said. "It's fractured, but I can heal it."

"The baby?"

"Fine," she whispered. Kakashi smiled at her. He would be like a doting uncle, she thought. One reason right there not to leave the village. But Kakashi wasn't why she was considering leaving in the first place.

She turned her attention back to the field. The Grass Jounin were being rounded up by Naruto clones. They were all four together, back to back, and—it seemed—surrendering.

What else can they do? She wondered, staring in amazement. What could anyone do against Naruto?

The onslaught of Narutos had not ceased. More and more were pouring forth from the mountain pass—like a river of molten light. It

had been a long time since Sakura had seen Naruto really *extend* himself. She had forgotten how many clones he could make. She had forgotten how powerful they were. Naruto was his own army.

Was he going to destroy the whole Grass?

Sakura carefully got to her feet. Her shoulder protested with a stab of pain, but she didn't show it. Kakashi offered her a hand for support anyway.

"Sakura!" Lee said, arriving just as she was starting the process of self-healing her injury. A little chakra directed in a precise way….

"I'm okay," she said, working her shoulder carefully as the jutsu took effect. It would be a stiff for a bit, but she could feel that the bone was healing rapidly. It would be good as new in a few minutes. "What about them?" She pointed to the Jounin.

"We are to relieve them of their weapons and bring them with us," Rock Lee said. "And anyone else we encounter."

"Is Naruto going to raze the village to the ground?" Kakashi asked. "He was very against that option."

"No," Rock Lee said. "We have intelligence that the Grass is a hair's breadth from open mutiny. Naruto means to stop them before they start killing each other. We are to force surrender."

Sakura shared a worried glance with Kakashi. "The Genin," she said. "They'll be caught in the middle."

"I know," Kakashi said. "Come on. We might be in time."

Itachi and the other Leaf Genin had burst right into the hornet's nest.

The room they emerged into trying to find a way around the ravine was spacious, with corridors leading out every which way. It was

packed with Grass ninja. And not just any Grass ninja. Seasoned warriors, Jounin mostly, with hard, cold eyes. And in their midst…

"Marnix."

The name just slipped out of his mouth. Itachi would have recognized that face anywhere. Marnix. The man had shoulders broad enough for a child to sit comfortably on either side of his head. He had come to dinner parties before, in Itachi's childhood. He had trouble remembering such occasions now—it seemed like someone else's life—but he recalled it in a series of flashes.

He hadn't been at the parties much. They were for adults and he and Rina were not invited to the table, but he had seen the guests and been seen by them. He remembered Marnix. He remembered this man's eyes—full of pride, full of distain, and full of distrust and contempt when he looked at his mother.

He felt Amaya clutch his arm from behind. "Itachi," she whispered. The fright in her voice made his name come out of her lips in a quavering ripple.

"I know," he said. "We should not have come this way."

He had no doubt this was the right pathway to Rina. But he would never reach her through this. Something on the far side of the room seemed to be drawing the attention of most of the people in the cavern—A battle? A skirmish?—but their arrival had not gone unnoticed.

They were quickly surrounded. Amaya gasped, her body crushed against Itachi's a circle of Jounin penned them in together, back to back. Michiko's eyes were darting. Jumei shrunk toward the center of the circle. Haro glared defiantly, but there was nothing he or any of them could do.

They had gone and got themselves caught.

"Lord Marnix," one of the Grass ninja surrounding them called in a droll, almost lazy voice.

Marnix turned. He caught sight of Itachi and his whole face changed. He smiled, his lips twitching, stretching his cheeks. There was no joy in it. The emotion Itachi saw etched there was triumph. "Fortune does favor me," he murmured. "Lucia!" he bellowed. "Who do you suppose has just shown up?"

Lucia , Itachi thought. *My mother is here?*

He didn't see her. He saw only a swarm of Grass ninja, and Marnix. But through the gaps, beyond the Grass closest to him, there was a rock wall, and a door that appeared to have been blasted open, judging by the debris piled to either side of the archway. Beyond that there was commotion—a flurry of activity, though only so many of the Grass ninja seemed able or willing to get close. Someone was fighting—fighting for their lives…fighting a losing battle.

"It's your boy!" Marnix shouted over the noise. "I have both your children now, Lucia! Surrender immediately, call off your guard dogs, or I will slit his throat and rip out his tongue." Marnix turned to a grizzled Jounin who was one of their guards and nodded toward Itachi. "Bring him down."

The next few seconds were a blur. Itachi gathered his chakra, preparing to…he didn't know. There wasn't much he could do. In the time it took him to take one breath, a chain wrapped around his legs, tightening at the knees. He had just enough time to look into the face of the grizzled veteran who held the other end before the chain was yanked and he toppled, the back of his head bouncing against the stone floor. Pain lanced through him and he cried out. Colors swam and light flashed before his eyes.

He heard screams from the others around him as they were each felled, one by one, in what he hoped was a similar manner. He felt the Grass moving past him as he fell. He couldn't see what had happened.

Don't kill them please. They're my friends.

Eventually, his vision cleared, though his head throbbed horribly. He struggled to move, but the chain around his legs seemed to have a mind of its own. It gripped him tighter, slithering up his legs, around his waist, and pinning his arms to his sides all the way up to his shoulders until he was only able to inch through the dirt like a worm. He had to twist his torso and maneuver his hips in a ridiculous fashion just enough to see what had happened to his friends. He did it anyway. He didn't care what he looked like to Marnix or the Grass.

Haro was on his knees. Amaya was lying prone with her face in the dirt. Jumei and Michiko had knives held to their throats. But they were all, thankfully, still alive.

Marnix was standing over him, watching him roll helplessly from side to side, a smirk on his face. "Last chance, Lucia!" he shouted, and reached down, seizing Itachi by the hair.

"Stop!"

Itachi's body trembled. That was his mother's voice. *No* , he wanted to say. *Stay where you are* . But he couldn't speak. He could only stare up at Marnix's cold eyes. He saw light come into them as his mother's voice drifted through the air like a whisper.

"I surrender."

The Grass ninja shuffled back and to the sides of the room, parting to make a passage for Itachi's mother.

Marnix shoved him forward. He fell on his face at Marnix's feet, grunting from the impact, and struggled, wriggling until he could see his mother approach.

His mother passed between the Grass ninja like a ghost. Dressed all in white, she moved like some kind of ethereal creature, her pale face framed by her dark hair like a shadow, her feet moving slowly

but deliberately, one in front of the other. Her dark eyes were glued to him, paying no attention whatsoever to the Grass ninja on either side of her, however malevolently they glowered as she passed.

A few Leaf ninja could be seen behind her, through the parted crowds—her guards. Itachi recognized Ino, Rina's teacher Tenten, Neji, and Shikamaru. They looked tired, beaten and lashed, but not out of the fight. Still, they hung back, though poised to strike or defend. But against all these ninja… Would they all die?

His mother approached him. There was no sign of sadness, or regret, or any of the emotion he was used to seeing in her expression. Instead, he saw something new. Anger. There was a light in her face. Her eyes burned with fury.

She stopped a foot away from Marnix, looking right into his face. She lifted her chin. She opened her mouth.

He slapped her.

The blow was so hard, the sound of it rebounded off the walls. His mother collapsed from the force, falling hard to the ground. No one spoke, but there was a collective intake of breath in the room. Even some of the Grass ninja seemed…surprised. Beside Marnix, Itachi's mother looked so slight, just a slender waif, unarmed and surrounded by enemies. Seconds passed while Itachi's mother remained on her knees in complete silence. Slowly, she got up, her cheek flaming red, and lifted her eyes.

"I will strike you again," Marnix said. "Unless you tell me, without your usual bullshit, where you hid the inheritance."

She replied quietly, without even a tremor. "You will have to do better than that."

"Very well." Marnix drew a blade from a holster at his hip. His mother didn't bat an eye.

Itachi struggled in the chains that held him. His Sharingan spun futilely. He wrenched his neck trying to break loose.

Marnix held the knife before her face, right over the bruise from his hand that was just beginning to form. He touched the blade to her cheek. "Where is the inheritance?"

His mother didn't speak. Marnix didn't repeat the question again. The blade cut into her face. Red blossomed under her eye, following the knife in a curved line down to her chin, a cut deep enough to forever mar the statuesque beauty that had always been hers.

Blood spilled down one side of her face, painting the whole lower left side red. She looked Marnix dead straight in the eyes and said nothing.

Marnix laughed, as if cutting her flesh somehow relieved him. Maybe he was only doing it for fun. It would be faster, Itachi realized, to threaten him. But he seemed to enjoy hurting Lucia. He chuckled at the sight of her. "What is it with this *act* you put on?" he asked her. "I've never understood it. You were always like this, so proud, pretending to be so above it all, pretending to be something *decent* , when everyone knows you're just a greedy little whore. You have used every asset you have—h" he looked up and down her body approvingly, a undisguised leer on his face—"to achieve your own ends. You are no different from the rest of us."

His mother said nothing.

Marnix snorted. "Please don't think I *blame* you. If I were a woman, I would do the same. But the *act* confuses me. No one believes it. Your husband married you knowing you had slept with half a dozen men before you were yet sixteen. Even that Shinobi lover of yours knew it, I'm sure. You must *realize* what you are."

Itachi had to bite his tongue to keep from screaming. Marnix was wrong. Itachi didn't know the whole story, but he knew that Marnix was wrong. His mother *was* noble. In her own way. She wasn't clean,

perhaps, but she was good. Her intentions, her feelings, her dedication to her children, her sacrifice for their future...she was the furthest thing from greed and selfishness and everything else that the Higher Houses stood for.

And that's why he'll cut her face to ribbons , Itachi thought. *He'll laugh at every line of blood.*

"Just a whore," Marnix murmured, and rested the blade of the knife against the opposite cheek.

A Grass ninja shoved her way to the front. "Stop it, Marnix. If you want to threaten a woman, threaten me."

The room went quiet.

Itachi could see the speaker but didn't know her. She looked young, but it was hard to tell. She was athletically built, with muscles in her arms and shoulders, strong legs and a curvaceous, developed figure. Her face was very pretty, but her hair was wild, and there was wildness in her eyes too.

No one said anything.

Marnix turned, frowning at her. "Go back to your room, Kaia." The way he spoke to her was almost lazy.

"I am not a child," she said, emotion thick in her voice. "As you well know." She turned to face the rest of the observers in the room. "Is this the Grass?" she shouted. The words rolled off her tongue short and clipped. Her gloved hands were clenched into fists. She threw a defiant, fiery gaze at her peers. "Is this our leader? Is *he* our Kage now? This…monster?"

The Grass Jounin just stared at her. They did not regard her all the same. Some dismissed her with a glance. Some seemed irritated that she had spoken. Others looked at her with troubled eyes. More

than a few watched her intently, almost holding their breath, as if waiting for something.

"Am I the standard?" the girl exclaimed. "Is this what we do now? Do you know what this man intends? What he thinks of us? Means for us? Don't you know what he *did* to me?"

The cave was silent.

She screamed. "Don't pretend you don't hear me! *Everyone* knows!"

"Get her out of here," Marnix barked. "She has lost her mind."

A tall, imposing Jounin approached the girl, but she drew a kunai and leveled it at him, eyes blazing, the torchlight reflected in the dark depths of her eyes. "Don't *you* touch me. I know *you* . How many must be ruined for your greed? How many must die?" She screamed again at the room. "I did not choose this! Is that what you think? I was deceived! We are all deceived!"

"Get that whore woman out of here!" Marnix bellowed. The hand he had around Itachi's mother's throat tightened. "If she can't mind her tongue, cut it out!"

The Jounin approaching the girl actually drew a blade.

It was like a match thrown into a haystack.

Grass Jounin turned on Grass Jounin. Blades were drawn. Hands signs flickered. Itachi's own captor leapt forward, arriving just in time to stop one Grass Jounin from stabbing another in the throat. The bonds holding him loosened. He rose painfully to his knees.

Fighting erupted everywhere.

Marnix was cursing.

It's a mutiny, Itachi thought. *They'll all kill each other.*

Michiko was free, dirty strands of flame red hair flying around her face. Immediately she brandished a parasol from the inside of her sleeve, just a wooden stick that snapped open, revealing a wheel of color. It spun in her slender hands. She turned in a circle. The whole world went mad.

Colors seemed to be flying off the parasol like fresh paint. Everything they touched turned instantly the color that touched it. Grass Shinobi who had been standing around them, closest to them, started with amazement as they were suddenly doused in red, orange, green, purple, yellow, blue. And then burned through their flesh like acid. And the colors continued to churn, creating a dizzying, sickening, kaleidoscope.

It's just a genjutsu , Itachi thought.

His Sharingan saw right through it, but the Grass Shinobi around them were screaming, swooning or shutting their eyes and retreating. Not all of them were taken in, but it was enough to get out of the middle of the fray.

Except that Haro and Amaya had also fallen under Michiko's spell. He could see Haro frantically brushing at his clothes and staring in horror at his hands, as if they were covered in paint—paint that seemed to itch and burn judging by the expression on his face. Itachi struggled free of the chains that had fallen loose around them. He stumbled to his feet and dashed forward to release his teammates, hitting both of them with a slap of concentrated chakra. Haro started out of it, yelling at phantoms, while Amaya blinked herself slowly alert. Jumei needed no assistance. He was familiar with Michiko's technique, it seemed, and had not been caught. He stood by her side, easy to ignore beside her in his nondescript clothes and unimpressive height and build, but his sharp brown eyes watched everything, guarding his teammate against anyone who might attempt to get close to her.

"Let's go back!" Amaya gasped. "Into the tunnels."

But it was impossible.

Fighting had erupted all around them.

Across the room, the Leaf Shinobi, previously in captivity, were fighting the Grass, trying to get to Lucia from the other side. They would not be in time. They had to fight for every step. He could see Neji and Tenten tag teaming to take down a pair of Grass Jounin. And there was Shikamaru, with his Shadow Possession jutsu morphing into the Shadow Strangling jutsu. He went right for a Grass Jounin with a pale face and eyes like a zombie, rendering him unconscious—or perhaps killing him; Itachi was not entirely sure.

Michiko's genjutsu hadn't worked on everyone surrounding them either. They had moved four steps before they were drawn into battle. Amaya had her shuriken stars out. Light bombs hurled from her fists flashed, obscuring the battlefield in an attempt to buffer their escape to the passage they had come through. Haro moved in after the light from the bombs wore off, throwing up the earth under the feet of the enemy so that they stumbled and fell.

It was chaos. Even with the Sharingan, Itachi couldn't keep track of everything. But he wasn't trying to. What he absorbed of the battle was secondary. He was searching frantically through the fight for what had happened to her mother.

There she was. Held against the wall. Marnix had her by the neck, choking her, it looked like. He was ignoring the battle around them. Grass ninja loyal to him were protecting him from the rest, locked in pitched battle with their brethren. Marnix seemed intent only on ripping secrets from his mother's throat. Or just throttling her.

He'll kill her.

Itachi was moving before his thought fully formed, though he know he wouldn't get there fast enough. He didn't know what he would do even if he could get there in time.

That was when Kaia broke through Marnix's circle of protectors—or maybe she was let through—a grim look on her face.

Marnix was not a Shinobi. He had no Shinobi training. But he was strong and he could brawl. He saw the girl coming and stepped to the side as she lunged past. He caught the girl's wrist and twisted. The kunai she held dropped from her hand. His other fist came at her head from the side with enough power to cave in her skull.

Kaia vanished. Grass exploded out of the air where she had been, spinning down to the cave floor. Marnix was left clutching air and punching a bundle of weeds.

Substitution , Itachi thought.

"I'll show you…" Kaia shouted. She reappeared behind Marnix, fingers flickering through a series of hand signs. "What it really means to be Kunoichi!"

Chakra snakes, Itachi realized. His Sharingan remembered, having memorized this particular jutsu less than an hour ago. *She must have been a student of Juo's.*

Kaia crouched, hands on the ground, and lines of chakra emanated from her fingers. They slithered toward Marnix, faster than a man could move, and caught him about the ankle. Swifter than thought, they coiled about his legs, and then his torso, growing longer and thicker as they wrapped him higher and tighter. The bottom ends burrowed deep into the ground, resembling vines more than snakes now.

"This is my own variation," Kaia announced. "I've been working on it for some time. I call it the Flower Trap."

The shape of a snakes' heads dissolved. Blossoms bloomed from the top of the coils. Vines took root at Marnix's feet, burrowing deeply into the ground and wrapping around his body. The flowers were magenta, saturated in color, and emitted a cloying, but strangely

intoxicating scent. Marnix could barely be seen beneath the vines. They grew and thickened, wrapping him in a cocoon of green until only his eyes showed, glaring balefully at the girl before him. Kaia brandished a knife.

But his Grass Jounin guards were not idle. Someone wearing a Grass headband came upon Kaia from behind. She didn't see him at all. He struck her against the back of her head with the handle of a katana. She went down in a heap.

The flowers wilted. The vines dissipated into nothing, chakra scattering like a sigh released from the lips.

"Lord Marnix," the unknown Grass Shinobi guard said in a cold voice. "I warned you not to push the Kunoichi too far."

Marnix looked paler than he had been before Kaia appeared, but he nodded curtly and straightened. "You will be rewarded," he said. "Not least for that advice. I have a bad habit of not taking women seriously. Time to remedy that."

He turned again on Itachi's mother. She was slumped against the wall, her eyes glassy. She stared at nothing, expression frozen and brow sweaty, as if she was not even awake, as if she were already dead, though her chest rose and fell with even breaths. Had she gone catatonic? Did she even know what was about to happen to her?

"Marnix!" Itachi shouted. "Stop! Don't touch her!"

His hands formed the signs without thought. Chidori, bright and blazing with streaks of blue and white, came alive in his hands. With his Sharingan, he sought a path through the crowd, around the fighting, and straight at the man who didn't even seem to register his voice.

He charged. Amaya's frightened voice followed him, but the sounds of the battle thumped in his ears and absorbed her words.

Everything turned to black and white. Nothing mattered except for the enemy before him, the Chidori in his fist, and his mother's oddly stiff body being lifted from the ground by her throat.

His mother seemed to come partially alive as Marnix dropped her on her heels. She gasped at least, and tore at the fingers around her neck.

"I will take your tongue" Marnix told her, "since you will not use it, and then I will cut the flesh from your face, strip by strip, until you wish you had told me everything I want to know. I *will* hear you scream."

He had a knife in his hand. Itachi could see it. It was a small paring knife, a simple tool. He held it to his mother's face, squeezing her cheeks until he forced her jaw open.

"Marnix!" Itachi bellowed.

Marnix hesitated. He lifted his head, as if registering his name, but Itachi's scream had been swallowed by the cries of others. It was not that that caused Marnix to hesitate.

A rise swell of sound was filling the room.

"Uchiha! Uchiha!"

Are they screaming at me? he wondered. *My Sharingan?*

No one was looking at him, not that he could see, but they parted before him like a curtain, fleeing away from him…from his Sharingan…No. They fled from something coming *behind* him.

Sasuke .

Itachi threw himself to the side, Chidori flickering out, and pressed himself against the wall to let his uncle through. There was nothing else he could do.

Sasuke descended upon the Grass like a storm. Suzanoo blazed around him, armor and bone and ethereal spirit, its outer layers wreathed in the black flame of Amaterasu. Whatever he touched caught fire and burned. Whatever attempted to touch him met an impenetrable wall. Susanoo wielded a sword of black fire that consumed light as it arced through the air. Within that vortex of power, Sasuke's face burned with a cold, focused fury. The Grass scattered like leaves. Trained Jounin parted and fled before the red and black wheel of the Sharingan as if he could scorch them through by glance alone.

Maybe he could.

It's my uncle , he told himself, *it's my uncle* , but could hardly keep hold of the thought. This terror was nobody's anyone.

He'll kill everyone here.

Sasuke passed right by him. His eyes drifted over him. They hesitated a moment, registering his presence, asking "what are you doing here?" but Sasuke didn't speak. He also didn't slow down.

He cut through the Grass that did not get out of his way. Those that fled he ignored. He made a beeline right for Lucia. Marnix, looking suddenly small, was staring at Sasuke as if unable to process if what he saw was real. His hand was still around Itachi's mother's face. He seemed to have forgotten the blade in his other hand.

"Release her," Sasuke said, "immediately, or I will force you to it. I warn you: I am not feeling patient."

Marnix didn't move. "Who-?"

The arc of Sasuke's own katana was graceful, like the leap of a silver fish. It flashed beautifully, catching the torchlight as it cut the air. It severed Marnix's arm at the shoulder. It cut all the way through flesh and bone without a pause. The appendage dropped to the cave floor.

Itachi's mother, dark eyes wide, fell back against the wall. Sasuke stepped between her and Marnix.

Marnix was clutching a bleeding stump. His face was white. "You can't do this," he said. "I'm—"

His shoulder caught fire. Black fire. Amaterasu licked at the edges of Sasuke's blade. When the metal sliced through his arm, the flame caught the flesh and held. Marnix started screaming.

"I don't know or care who you are," Sasuke said.

The flames did not touch Itachi's mother. Sasuke seemed to be able to control them, directing them away from her, but Marnix fell to the ground, writhing in black fire.

A roar of anger and dismay went up from the Grass Shinobi watching —those that had followed Marnix closest anyway, those that had not already fled.

Sasuke turned to face them.

This is bad , Itachi thought. His stomach tightened. As much as Sasuke might not care about Marnix, the others in the room did. All around him he saw Grass Jounin, an army of them, with only spots of battered, bruised, and exhausted Leaf ninja, most of them Genin.

He wasn't worried about Sasuke. He was worried about the body count.

This is really really bad.

What leadership the Grass had had was now gone. Marnix wasn't screaming anymore. It took ten seconds, maybe less, before his body was a smoldering ruin of charred flesh and blistered bone.

Everyone in the room was enraged, or afraid, or grief-stricken, all armed to the teeth. Hot blood… sharp blades…

This is a death pit. Sasuke will kill them all…if they don't all kill each other first.

Susanoo broadened around Sasuke, enveloping Itachi's mother too. She looked about, surprised but conscious, almost as if just waking from a deep sleep. Itachi shrunk further against the wall, but Sasuke's Sharingan found him. His uncle moved toward him, his mother in tow. Susanoo grew larger. Itachi stared at it in terror, though he knew Sasuke meant him no harm. Still, his heart fluttered as spiritual bony fingers came toward him, wrapping protectively around him.

It had been a minute, maybe less, since Sasuke first emerged in this broad stone chamber. It had all happened quickly.

And then the fighting resumed.

Blades were flung at Itachi's face, but rebounded off the shield of Susanoo. Sasuke had timed it perfectly. He was safe. He and his mother alone.

My friends , Itachi thought, scanning the room for them.

He was relieved to see that the Leaf Jounin had fought their way through the Grass to unite with the Grass Genin. He could see Tenten defending Haro and Amaya and Ino with Michiko and Jumei. Neji was out in front of them all, palm out, milky eyes watching everything. Shikamaru hung toward the back, clutching a wounded shoulder.

But the Grass weren't concentrated on attacking the Leaf. Most were attacking each other.

They banded in groups, aligning themselves to one another politically and personally in a manner beyond Itachi's understanding. He could not comprehend how much strife and discontent had been brewing, and for how long, to produce the monstrosity he was now witnessing.

Grass Shinobi turned sharpened blades on other Grass Shinobi. Jutsus were levelled against people who lived together, had grown up together, struggled together...

It was the worst thing Itachi had ever seen. He didn't know these people. He had no association to their village or its factions, and he knew they were responsible for Rina's kidnapping—maybe even her death, if he was too late—but even so, the sight of them turning on one another with blades churned his stomach. It wouldn't be long before the floor was slick with blood, the bodies piled high. Even if the Leaf managed to get out with all the Genin, what they would leave behind…

Sasuke's Susanoo swelled in size. Amaterasu flared within it.

"No," Itachi whispered. "No. Uncle, no!"

It was clear that Sasuke meant to burn them all.

That was when Naruto flooded the cavern.

Itachi perceived it that way—a flood of Narutos, hundreds of them, spilling into the cave, packed tightly together like a school of fish, moving as a single unit. Some of them were attacked and vanished into nothingness. But more took their place. Fighting stopped suddenly as battling ninja were forced apart and crowded into single units surrounded by Narutos.

Sasuke pulled Susanoo back, watching impassively. Itachi wiped sweat from his brow.

Narutos stampeded into the cavern until there was no room for anyone to move, or breathe, or do anything much at all except stare as one Naruto rose above the others, walking on the hands of his clones.

"I'm taking ownership of the Grass village!" the elevated Naruto shouted. "Does anyone have a problem with that?"

The cavern glowed from the light that emanated from the host of Narutos. No one spoke. There were neither objections nor cheers. Itachi's mother, still wrapped in the protection of Susanoo, was staring at all the Narutos stuffing the cavern in bewilderment.

"Rina," Itachi gasped to Sasuke. "We have to find Rina!"

"I thought she would be here," Sasuke said, looking around. "But I don't see her."

"She's close," Itachi said. "I saw her! She was in this cavern back through the tunnels. I saw her with a Grass Genin. Yukio chased after them. We were trying to find around, but we ran into this."

"Which way?" Sasuke said darkly.

His mother's face was pale. She mouthed something, but Itachi couldn't make it out.

Itachi tried to reorient himself. "I think that way," he said, pointing the only direction that made sense. There was a stair against the far wall on his right, leading down into darkness.

Sasuke was moving before he finished extending his arm. Itachi spared a glance for his mother. She looked shaken. "It's okay, mom," he told her. "Stay with Naruto. We'll bring Rina to you."

Her face was pale. Blood still trickled from her cheek. She was shaking.

She's running on adrenaline , Itachi thought. *There's not much else holding her up.*

"I'll be safe," he promised her.

"We'll go too!"

It was Amaya, appearing on Itachi's side. The Grass, it seemed, had unilaterally surrendered following Naruto's announcement. At least,

the fighting had completely stopped, and there were more Leaf Jounin in the cavern now. Jounin in Leaf headbands were systematically relieving the Grass of their weapons and organizing them into groups.

Ino approached Lucia. "Let me look at your cheek," she said. "Don't worry. The Grass has fallen. Any pockets of resistance will soon surrender. They'll be perfectly safe."

His mother did not say anything. It seemed as if she could not.

She is really shaken.

"Come on now," Ino said. "Let's have a seat over here—"

Itachi didn't wait for more. Sasuke had already left the chamber. Itachi took off after him, the other Leaf Genin close behind him. He was not the only worried one, of course. Yukio's teammates were concerned about Yukio as well as Rina. Who knew what had happened after Yukio leapt the cavern and chased after that Grass Genin alone?

Itachi's heart pumped hard as he followed Sasuke down the dark stair, spidery tendrils of anxiety snaking through his body with every step. The stairs went down and down and down but eventually leveled out into a corridor with only one torch burning. By the light of the flame, he could see that there were no doors, but there was one adjoining tunnel.

That must be where Rina and that Grass Genin came through from the room with the chasm , he thought hopefully. *And if they didn't go up the stairs then they must have gone this way!*

His feet picked up speed. Sasuke was still somewhere ahead. Much faster, and deadlier, he would reach Rina first and see…whatever there was to see. Behind him, the other Genin followed in a single file line. Once he heard Haro curse as he tripped over something hidden on the ground, but no one slowed.

The tunnel eventually opened into a room. Itachi saw Sasuke before anything else. His uncle's back blocked the view of the room. Susanoo was gone. His uncle had drawn no weapons. He just stood in the doorway, still as a statue, staring at whatever lay beyond.

No , Itachi thought. *No. That can't be good.*

Itachi burst into the room behind Sasuke, ducking under his uncle's arm. His uncle didn't catch or try to inhibit him. There was nothing in the room to fight. There were no enemies there.

There was nothing but bodies.

A boy—the Grass Genin—lay dead on the stone floor, his throat opened, blood pooling in a sticky mess around his body, eyes staring open in shock. He was just a child, despite his weapons and armored headband, no older than Itachi. The sight of his broken body set Itachi's skin crawling and stomach heaving, but he had no moment to spare for his shriven emotions.

Slumped against the far wall was Yukio. His skin looked pallid. He was not moving, not breathing, not speaking, or boasting, or grinning. He didn't stir when they entered, not even when Michiko started screaming.

Cuddled up beside Yukio, practically half in his lap, face pressed against Yukio's shoulder, was Rina. She didn't move either. She was perfectly still, curled in a miserable ball like a half-dead kitten.

Sasuke hadn't moved, regarding her tiny, inert body with paralyzing fear. Itachi dashed past him.

"RINA!"

At the sound of his voice, a squeak emitted from her throat.

She was alive!

"Rina!"

He tumbled to the ground beside her. He pulled her from Yukio's arm, turning her face toward him. Her face was weirdly still, dead, like a doll's, staring at nothing.

Driven by desire to see her show signs of life, he slapped her across the face.

Tears gushed from her eyes. Big, fat, wet tears spilled down her cheeks. Her face broke into quivering lines. Her chest started to heave with trembling, aching breaths. Her arms wrapped around his neck, her legs around his waist, clinging to him so tightly he almost couldn't breathe.

"Itachi," she wept into his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," and descended into incoherent mumbles and sobs.

"It's okay," he whispered, though he wasn't sure it was really. "I'm sorry too."

Haro and Jumei were kneeling beside Yukio. Jumei's hands were shaking as they felt Yukio's pale, greyish skin for a pulse and checked his mouth for breath. Michiko stood a few paces back, dancing from foot to foot.

"He's alive," Haro gasped. "At least, I think he's alive. His heart is beating so slowly, I'm not sure I heard it. If he is alive, it won't be for much longer. Jumei, do you have any adrenaline?"

Jumei's head jerked, but his hands were shaking too hard to unbuckle the pouch from around his waist. Haro had to do it for him. There was some liquid in a tiny glass bottle and a syringe. Haro drew the liquid into the syringe with the needle.

"You bastard," Haro growled at Yukio under his breath as the liquid filled to the line. "You can't just die in cave, leaving everyone so mad at you…." He trailed off in a mumble. Ignoring everyone, even Amaya's startled cry, Haro cut open Yukio's shirt with his kunai and jabbed the syringe straight into Yukio's chest-right through the heart.

Rina screamed into Itachi's ear. "No! No! No! He saved me. He saved me!"

"It's okay," Itachi whispered into her ear, holding her tightly. "He's….Haro's trying to help him."

Rina trembled, but she relaxed marginally, loosening her grip around Itachi's neck. Then she wriggled, trying to free herself from him. He allowed her to stand on her own feet. She remained hovering close to him, hands clenched into fists, watching Haro and Jumei fuss over Yukio with an intense expression on her face.

Itachi turned to look over his shoulder.

Sasuke remained in the doorway. He just stood there, katana sheathed, fear in his face. He couldn't do anything here. He was too late to help.

A collective gasp from all the hovering Genin made Itachi turned back.

Yukio's eyes were open. He was alive, but it was almost worse than before. His muscles jerked out of his control as if his blood was moving like sludge in his veins. He clutched at his chest, his expression gruesome with pain. He screamed silently.

Jumei and Haro were working together to put slugs on him, pulling them out of Haro's pouches and putting them everywhere Yukio's skin was exposed—on his chest, on his arms, on his neck, on his face. It was difficult to tell whether or not it was helping. Amaya was watching from a few steps to the left of Haro's shoulder, biting her lower lip. Michiko stood on the other side, parasol clutched in her hands, tears in her eyes.

Footsteps could be heard in the corridor, pounding the stone floors toward them.

Itachi turned.

Sakura burst into the room, blue-green eyes alight, Kakashi right on her heels.

"You're okay!" she gasped when she saw them.

Sasuke seemed to jerk out of his stupor. "Sakura," he gasped. He grabbed her by the shoulders as she passed and looked deeply and imploringly into her face. "Sakura, you're here. Sakura, the child…"

It was unclear what he meant, and Sakura didn't pause to unravel the meaning. She saw Yukio immediately and broke free of Sasuke's grip to join Haro where Yukio was failing.

"He's been poisoned," Haro was saying as Sakura knelt beside the boy. There were tears in his eyes. "He's dying. I gave him a shot of adrenaline. I think I just made it worse."

"No," Sakura said. "You saved his life. Here. Mix this for me." She pulled some powders and bottle of water from one of her pouches. "Be quick. I'm going to leech the poison."

Itachi didn't understand much of what Sakura was doing, except that whatever it was required extremely fine-tuned control of chakra. Her hands hovered over Yukio's chest. She started with the heart, an expression of concentration knotting her face, and then moved over Yukio's body vein by vein, drawing poison out of his skin with her own charka pulses, then covering the same ground again. And again. When Yukio's eyes opened a second time, he seemed conscious enough to take stock of the people around him. Pain still twisted his features.

"You're not going to die," Sakura told him. "But you must stay as still as you can for me."

They all waited in silence, watching for what seemed like an hour before Yukio's body finally stopped twitching and his chest began to rise and fall more normally. Sakura took the potion from Haro and

forced Yukio to drink all of it. After a few minutes, color came back into his face.

"I feel terrible," he croaked.

Sakura smiled.

"Oh, be grateful," Amaya said, her tone sharp. But there were relieved tears in her eyes. "For once in your life."

"I am," Yukio said. He closed his eyes again, as if speaking with them open exhausted him. "I thought I was gonna die on her after all, even though I promised..."

Tears gushed from Rina's eyes. She wiped them away, but more followed. She bowed her head to hide them, unable to speak.

Sakura rose and gave Jumei and Michiko a significant look. "You'll have to help him," she said to them. "He's not going to have much strength for walking. He's lucky to have survived."

"Will he recover?" Michiko whispered.

"Yes," Sakura said, and then added with a measure of warning, "for the most part."

She then turned to Itachi. "Is Rina okay?"

"I think so," Itachi said. "She seems to be. She's just upset."

Sakura nodded. Then she did a double take on him. "Your eye!" she exclaimed. "It's—"

Itachi blinked. He had forgotten all about it. His eye had been useless before the Sharingan came on him so suddenly. He got used to the fix and ignored the meaning. Had it really healed? He tried to deactivate the Sharingan.

And couldn't.

"Something's wrong," he said, panic creeping into his voice. "I can't —"

Sakura rushed over to him. Sasuke was there too, in near lock-step with her. They were both looking at his face, touching his cheeks, evaluating his eyes.

"His chakra is locked up," Sakura muttered to Sasuke. Then she spoke to Itachi. "Can you deactivate the good eye by itself?"

He tried it. "No." It was…stuck.

Sakura and Sasuke exchanged glances. "Have you heard anything like this?" she asked him.

"No," Sasuke said. "But there was a lot of lore I never learned."

"We probably shouldn't force it," Sakura said thoughtfully. "The eye appears to be working. Forcing it might damage it."

"Am I going to be stuck with the Sharingan activated all the time?" Itachi demanded.

"I don't know," Sakura said. "It might heal. It might not. Does it hurt?"

It didn't really, or not more than usual. It was just odd. If his eyes never deactivated, he would never be able to look at anyone without seeing their chakra. "It's got to drain me. What if it kills me?"

"For a true Uchiha, the Sharingan alone doesn't use much chakra," Sasuke said. "Not much more than your normal body functions use anyway. It will be a little like wearing weights, but for your chakra, not your muscles. My brother used to walk around with them activated all the time. It might tire you out a little until you get used to it. It won't kill you."

Itachi wished he had a mirror. He wanted to know what his face looked like. Red eyes, wounds stitched up with black thread, dirt all

over his body, packed into every pore and crevice. He must look frightening. But he felt fine.

I saved her , he thought. *That's what counts. It was all worth it.*

Rina was still crying. Though her head was lowered, he could see the tears dripping off her chin and down to the rock floor beneath her feet.

"Rina," he whispered, crouching in front of her. "Rina, it's okay. Everything's fine. Really. I'm not mad at you."

She heaved a little breath. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," he repeated. "You're safe. It's okay."

"Mom?" She bleated. Her body was trembling.

And then he understood. She was okay. But she thought that… She worried that—

"She's fine," he said quickly. Maybe too quickly, because Rina's knees trembled, her small hands clenching into fists. "Sasuke saved her," Itachi clarified. "Marnix was going to kill her, but Sasuke saved her. She's okay."

Rina lifted her tear-streaked face. She took one look at him, absorbing truth from his expression, and then turned and threw herself at Sasuke.

It was an odd thing to behold. Sasuke had always dismissed Rina. Since they had first set foot in Konoha, he had held himself aloof, not quite acknowledging her existence, even as he begrudgingly acknowledged Itachi. Even now, since entering the cave, he had held his distance. But when Rina threw herself at him with complete abandon, all that hardness—the impenetrable wall of coldness that Itachi had always sensed was meant to protect Sasuke more than it was to keep them out—melted instantly.

He was quick to react. He caught Rina up as if she were his own child, lifting her full off the ground and drawing her squarely and completely into the envelopment of his arms and body. His Sharingan had been dismissed. His sword was sheathed. He held Rina close, arms wrapped securely around her small body as she sobbed incoherent cries of gratitude and apology into his shoulder.

Sasuke rested his chin on Rina's head and closed his eyes with relief. We opened them, he looked over his niece and straight into Sakura's face. Something seemed to pass between them, though Itachi could not say exactly what. Sakura did not smile, but she didn't seem upset either. They stared at each other for several long moments. Tight when Sasuke's lips parted, Sakura turned abruptly away.

"We should head back," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "Naruto will be sorting things out. And Lucia will be anxious to see her children."

"Are you all right?" Sasuke asked her. "You look like you've been in a fight."

"I'm fine," Sakura said, not meeting his gaze. She seemed intent to look anywhere else. "Kakashi was with me."

Sasuke spared a grateful glance for Kakashi, who had been watching all the proceedings with lazy interest. He raised a hand in acknowledgment when Sasuke caught his eye.

Sasuke turned back to Sakura. She was taking her vials and powders back from Haro and adjusting her pouches. Michiko and Jumei were helping Yukio to stand, looping his arms over their shoulders and rising slowly from a crouch on either side of him. Yukio was cursing a lot under his breath, but managed to get up, hobbled awkwardly between his teammates.

Sakura led the way back up the tunnel. Sasuke, still carrying Rina, fell in beside her. "Not just you," he said, chancing conversation with

her again, despite that she did not seem to want to talk. "I mean—"

"Everything is all right," Sakura said. "We… We'll talk later. I can't do it right now."

Sasuke subsided into silence.

Itachi followed behind both of his mentors, with Amaya and Haro catching up on either side of him. Yukio's team followed more slowly, with Kakashi bringing up the rear.

There wasn't much conversation as they headed back up the tunnel. Itachi began to realize how tired he was. His muscles felt watery and his body was starting to shake, with chills coming and going, as his system fought for the reserves of energy to keep all his parts moving. He wanted a bath. And then to sleep for a week.

But first…

By the time they reached the main chamber, it was clear that the Grass had fully surrendered to the Leaf. There were fewer Naruto clones than before, either because most had been dismissed or had been sent elsewhere on other tasks. One of the Naruto clones was deep in conversation with Shikamaru, whose shoulder had been badaged. His mother was standing near them, Ino hovering close beside her, looking ready to catch her if she fell. His mother's face had been cleaned and her cheek bandaged. Itachi wondered if the deep cut would leave a scar. There was no sign of Marnix's body.

His mother's head jerked to attention as they came trudging up the corridor. Her eyes swung first to Sasuke, with Rina bundled in his arms, safe and unharmed, Itachi following behind. She took a deep, shuddering breath. It seemed to release a siege that had been holding the rest of her body and emotions in panicked rigidity. The faint sheen of tears lent sparkle to her eyes.

Sasuke didn't set Rina down. He walked her to her mother. With a soft sound like that of a lamb, Rina unraveled her arms from around

Sasuke's neck and transferred them to her mother. They clung to each other tightly.

"Thank you," Itachi's mother whispered to Sasuke as Rina came to rest her head on her shoulder, the way she had done when she was five.

"She's fine," Sasuke said. "They're both okay. It's over."

Itachi looked around the room.

It was hardly over. Pockets of the Grass were still being presided over by Leaf Ninja. There was the burning village above them, not to mention the reason for all of this—his mother's money, and what she had done with it.

Shikamaru strolled toward them. "Glad to see that she wasn't hurt," he said, nodding to Rina. "Lucia, our scouts have found the body of an old woman. We'll need you to identify her. It's probably Lady Romjin."

His mother nodded silently.

Shikamaru grunted. "I know you just want to be with your family, but we'll also need to have some discussions when we get back to the Leaf," he said. "We need answers to make some decisions. Will you cooperate?"

Lucia laid her cheek against Rina's head. "Of course," she said, kissing Rina's hair tenderly. "Whatever you need."

What is Naruto going to do with the Grass? Itachi wondered. And the Feudal Lords? And what about the Higher Houses?

"Where's Gehard?" he said out loud. "Is he…?"

He couldn't quite ask if his step father was dead. He had no affection for Gerhard, and he was sure that lack of feeling was mutual, but somehow it seemed wrong to wish him an ill fate.

Looking around the room, he did not see the man anywhere. Gehard should stick out. But all he saw were Leaf Jounin and Grass prisoners. He did notice that the Grass girl—Kaia—has survived. She was sitting up on the ground, her back to the wall. In her arms was another Grass ninja several years younger, a Genin with dirty blonde hair and green eyes. They were talking softly to each other, through tears that did not seem sad, as Leaf guards stood nearby and looked on.

"Ask him," Sakura said, pointing.

Her finger was directed at Juo. The veteran Grass Jounin was one of the captives in the room, surrounded by several Leaf guards, including Rock Lee. His companions were with him. All were injured, but none mortally.

One of the Naruto clones approached him.

Juo spoke before the Hokage could open his mouth. "I regret nothing," he said. There was no emotion in his voice. "If you must kill someone in the Grass for transgressions against the Leaf, I volunteer. I was the one who kidnapped the girl."

Naruto frowned. His clone glowed gold. "That's interesting," was all he said.

Kaia struggled up to knees. "No," she said, her voice floating to the center of the room from the wall, drawing attention with its desperation. "Juo, no. It's because of you that I-"

"Silence, Kaia," the Jounin said quietly, without looking at her. He kept the gaze of the Hokage. "Someone must pay for the Grass."

"Hmm," Naruto said. "I'm not going to answer on that right now. I've got other things to do. But a guard will be left here—a strong one, with a few of me—while we sort through everything that's happened since the Grass got involved with the Higher Houses. Right now, I'm

going to take Lucia and her family back to the Leaf. Is there anything you want to say to them before we leave?"

Juo looked at Lucia, still holding Rina, and briefly glanced at Itachi. "No," he said.

"Well, I have something," Lucia said. She set Rina down. Itachi's sister no longer had tears to shed, though her face was streaked with dirt and residue of salt. She stood on two feet, watching her mother approach her kidnapper in silence.

Lucia withdrew folded note from a pocket hidden in her dress, and handed it to Juo.

He took it with some confusion. "What is this?"

"Your earnings," she said. "For betting against my son. Let it be known in the Grass. I always pay my debts."

Juo held the note with a slack hand. He seemed confused. He met Lucia's eyes. He looked deeply into them. "You'll find your husband locked in a room beside the barracks," he said. "A small closet, appropriate, I thought, for a small man."

"Thank you," his mother said gravely.

TBC Next (final?) Chapter: Many resolutions…perhaps some surprises

THANK YOU VERY MUCH for reading! I know it took me a long time to continue this story…especially at the climax when it is so exciting. I hope you will still review. It really means a lot to me. Like really… you have no idea how much. It's the only compensation I get, so please consider leaving a thoughtful note. Even though it is Super Bowl Sunday.

Particular things that interest me (if you have an opinion):

How the crisis ended—Did you enjoy it? What/why/why not?

Comments on Characters: Yukio, Sasu/Saku, Naruto and the Grass, Juo, Lucia, Itachi, small-part characters like Kaia…. Whatever you might have thought or felt or reacted to.

What you still want to see resolved (there's quite a lot actually)

Chapter 26

And so it ends….

Well, not quite. This chapter was topping 50 pages when I decided to split it into two. So here you have the first half of the conclusion. One more chance to review! One more chance to make requests on loose ends…

White Rain

Chapter 26

By Zapenstap

Rain fell.

Itachi looked up and drops of water splashed against his cheeks and forehead, running into his Sharingan eyes—one perfect, the other frozen in the shape of the red wheel. Clouds rolled across the sky—dark, stormy clouds heavy with rain. His face was soaked, the dirt and grime washed clean from his skin.

It was good to see sky again, even clouded sky. The caves of the Grass might be a fair home for some, but he didn't think he could spend his life beneath the earth. It felt good to be free.

The rain was good for another reason. The structures of the Grass Village above ground had been burning for hours. Now the smoking wood was cooling.

That was his uncle's work. Sasuke smothered Amaterasu the moment Rina—surrounded by Konoha's forces—emerged from the Grass underground. He let the village continue to burn until the rain dripped from the sky onto her dark head. Then the black flames inexplicably went dead. His uncle didn't look back at the caves. He didn't spare a look for the village either. His eyes were all for Rina.

The valley was full of people. Most of them wore Leaf headbands, but there were pockets of Grass captives surrounded by guards. And there were Narutos everywhere, answering questions, providing reassurances, and delegating armies of ninja.

Itachi wanted to stand by his uncle, to thank him one more time, but he also didn't want to leave his mother and sister, who were hovering on the edge of the entrance to the Grass. His mother was looking out across the valley with a far-off look in her eyes. He traced his steps back to her.

"It's over," she murmured when he neared, sounding surprised.

"Is it?" he asked. "What about the Higher Houses? What will they do when they hear of this?"

His mother shrugged, her slender shoulders rolling. She swept dark hair from her shoulders and turned her face into the rain. "I don't care," she said.

Itachi had trouble believing that. "But they might retaliate."

"Having failed with Marnix, there's not much they can do," his mother said. "They were acting in secret before, and they thought that I had no allies." She brought her chin back down and looked out across the Konoha Shinobi, and all the Narutos. "There's not much they can do against this. I think we are safe. For now."

He watched her carefully. She was different. Something about her had changed. Was it just the enormous relief of having survived, of all of her children having survived? He wasn't sure.

He didn't ask her about Gehard. He didn't want to darken her mood.

Juo hadn't lied. Per his instructions, Itachi's stepfather had been found locked in a stone room the size of a closet, deep in the belly of the underground. Itachi had heard from some of the Jounin that he had almost pissed himself when the door was flung open and he

found himself staring at hordes of enemy Shinobi armed to the teeth and calling for him by name. Neither Itachi nor his mother had spoken to Gehard yet, nor were invited to do so. Itachi felt fine about that. His mother's face became stormy whenever he was mentioned. He was pretty sure the separation was intentional on the part of the Hokage. The Leaf Shinobi would bring Gehard back to Konoha with them as a prisoner. Naruto would "get to Gehard" eventually. That was all he knew.

Amaya and Haro joined him. They were both a mess—Amaya's hair caked in dirt, dust on both their faces, and with numerous scrapes and bruises between them, but the rain water was clearing some of that way, and at least they were alive and healthy. They had survived an A-rank mission. They seemed content, if weary around the edges.

Itachi noted Amaya's father—Sachio—watching them from a distance. He was bedecked in weapons, wearing the formal gear of Jounin, his Konoha headband displayed across his forehead. He looked…proud when he looked at Amaya. She didn't notice his gaze, but she stood straight and tall, despite the dirt and bruises. Haro hovered close to her.

The sight made Itachi smile.

Yukio's team joined them eventually. Yukio himself had to be supported by both Michiko and Jumei, and took slow, stumbling steps, grimacing in pain every ten feet. Sakura followed behind him, watching Yukio's every movement with a sharp, critical eye. When they stepped fully into the valley, she took off her gloves and flexed hot, sweaty fingers in the falling rain. Her eyes roved the crowds and landed on Sasuke's retreating form.

What will happen with the two of them ? Itachi wondered, measuring the distance between his uncle and his teacher.

He didn't know much about love. His only direct example of relationships was his mother—a woman whose parents were murdered, who was forced into marriage at sixteen, who had

endured abuse at the hand of her husband, had developed a taste for masochism, and chose to have two children with a known murderer in an extramarital affair that he knew little about. Compared to his mother's issues, the problems between Sasuke and Sakura seemed a small matter—assuming, of course, that they both wanted to overcome it. Perhaps that was the part Sakura was considering, her green eyes following the red and blue Uchiha fan on Sasuke's back.

"So we go home then," Amaya said to him quietly. "It feels strange, doesn't it? Almost too simple."

Itachi nodded.

"Well, I'm glad," Haro said, breathing deeply and lacing his fingers behind his neck. "I can use some simple."

Naruto clones transported Leaf Shinobi back to the Leaf Village in groups, using the yellow flash technique that so excited Yukio. Itachi's group—which included his mother, his sister, Sasuke, Sakura, and his and Yukio's Genin teams—were one of the first to be transported.

They materialized on the forested dirt path in front of the main gates rather than in the middle of the village itself. Rows of tall trees spread out before them on either side of the road. The boughs were heavily laden with green leaves, sunlight shining between them. This was the same road by which Itachi had come to Konoha. The ruts in the ground felt familiar. This was the threshold of home.

The gates to the village had been flung open wide. Konoha sentries were waving another group through—the group that had come just ahead of them. With the returning of the troops, it was no surprise to hear a multitude of voices on the other side of the gate. He supposed that people had come out to welcome their return. Or maybe they had never left.

It hasn't been long since we departed, Itachi thought wonderingly. *They might have been waiting there this whole time, anticipating victory.*

They walked along the road in a group. Rina walked beside Itachi, his mother and Sasuke following just behind them. A month ago, Rina might have wanted to take his hand, but it didn't seem to occur to her now. She walked like any one of the Genin, her chin lifted and her eyes bright, though she wore a dress—dirty and tattered now—and carried no weapons.

When they entered the village proper, a cheer went up from the civilian and Shinobi spectators, hoots and hollers as Rina was recognized, followed by applause. All of the Academy kids from Rina's class were there, and they rushed to greet Rina when they saw her safe and unharmed. Itachi flushed, embarrassed by the attention, and Rina was even more mortified as she was surrounded by her peers, her eyes darting from face to face as they packed in around her, voices piping with questions. But Itachi was pleased too. Not long ago, he would have gotten a different reception, he knew. And Rina—Rina thought she hadn't any friends.

At length, Itachi noticed that not all of the commotion was for them.

There was a caravan in the village.

Six large wagons were parked in a row just to the side of the main gate, each wagon bed filled to overflowing, goods piled high, though what exactly they carried was uncertain they were covered with canvases.

Merchants? Itachi thought quizzically.

They seemed to have just arrived and the villagers had gathered in curiosity. The driver of one of the front wagons was speaking with a pair of Jounin. A few men and women in plain work clothes were climbing down from the wagons to unhook the canvas tarps covering the wares and unhitch the horses.

One of the women was not working. She stood out from the rest, and not merely because she was only one not laboring. Itachi couldn't see her face, as she was facing away, but he noted her dark curly hair and her clothes. Few people in this country had curls. And she wore foreign dress—dark skirts and a plain blue woolen cloak of high quality, but the embroidery wasn't the sort that people around here cared for. Itachi recognized it though. The scrollwork was fashionable in his home country.

The foreign woman turned as their group entered the village.

"Aunt Cecile," Itachi said, blurting the name aloud reflexively as he recognized her face. Rina followed his gaze and started, looking as surprised as he felt. Itachi turned to his mother for an explanation...

She was already crossing the street. Aunt Cecile saw his mother and her face split into a smile. The sisters met and hugged in the middle of the road. The gathered villagers looked on, watching curiously. Confusion growing, Itachi approached, Rina close beside him.

"Lucia," Aunt Cecile said. "You look well."

"Do I?"

She didn't in Itachi's estimation. Her clothes were stained. Her hair was mussed. And there was a welt on her cheek from where Marnix had struck her face. It would be purple by nightfall.

"Considering the troubling rumors we've been hearing, you look alive, and that is well indeed," Cecile said. She turned to look at Itachi and his sister. "Itachi, Rina, you are safe. We are all blessed." His aunt smiled.

Itachi didn't have any response.

"How did you find the village?" his mother asked. "You were supposed to wait in town."

"With much wandering and cursing," Aunt Cecile said. "I could not abide in town, not after we started hearing the rumors. So we just rode into these woods and… looked." She made a face. "Shinobi found us eventually—all wrapped in cloth and bandages and bedecked with weapons. They gave us a fright. No exaggeration to the stories at all! But they've treated us well so far and we are glad to be found. We'd had an abominable time of it, stumbling around in the woods in circles. I told them I was your sister and they brought us here."

"They would," Lucia murmured. She eyed the line of wagons. "I thought I told you to bring only the essentials."

Cecile raised an eyebrow. "These *are* the essentials," she said, sounding amazed. "And you had best appreciate the pains I took to bring them here! Don't you *want* our mother's bureau? You were so fond of it as a girl."

Itachi was shocked. His mother's *bureau* ? But then the canvas tarps were being pulled off the wagons and he could see it all for himself. Itachi began to see what was under them. He became too distracted to listen further.

He recognized almost everything, some of it from Cecile's country estate, where he had spent a lot of his summers, but much more from his own house. There was the beautifully painted wooden chest that had once been in his mother's closet. And there was the heavy, engraved armchair that had been in the study. He saw the silver and gold gilded mirror from the front hallway that he and Rina used to make faces in. And there were many, many unopened wooden crates. He began to imagine what could be inside—Clothes? Dishes? Heirlooms that he had once been forbidden to touch? Books? His guitar? What did Aunt Cecile consider essential? He had forgotten about all of this. He had completely given it all up…this old life. To see it all now brought back part of himself that he thought had left behind and lost forever…

A small cry escaped Rina's lips.

He turned toward where she was looking. It was one of the last wagons. In the holding bed, lashed down with ropes and boxed in by more crates, was a piano.

He stared at it for several moments. In his Aunt Cecile's living room, where guests were nearly always entertained, it had looked appropriate, surrounded as it had been by upholstered chairs, plush carpet, heavy drapes, crystal vases, and embroidered cushions. In Konoha, in a wagon sitting still on a dirt street, the piano seemed both enormous and bizarre.

That didn't stop Rina from darting to the wagon as soon as it was fully uncovered. With ninja litheness, she clambered up the side and lifted her small body over the upper slat. She dropped down to the wagon bed. Her fingers touched the piano's shiny black casing, stroking the outside as if the instrument was sentient and her touch could sooth it. She lifted the cover to inspect the keys, each one individually hand-carved, all in a line. She touched one, softly, and a single note—the middle C—rang out clear as a bell. Rina's eyes shimmered faintly. She sucked her lower lip into her mouth and trapped between her teeth.

"What is that?" Yukio's voice carried from the group they had left.

Sasuke was staring at it too, his brow furrowed slightly in confusion.

"A piano," Itachi answered.

"It was not easy to transport," Cecile confessed to Itachi's mother with a sigh. "We've had to transfer it several times, and it is quite heavy. In this last leg, the crate broke and we just tossed it in the wagon and lashed it down the way you see it now. I do not think it has been damaged, and something told me it would be worth the effort."

Rina was on her knees in the wagon bed now, face in her hands. She was weeping.

"Thank you," Itachi's mother whispered quietly.

Sasuke watched the little girl, his brother's daughter, his niece, kneeling in the wagon bed—weeping. Outwardly, he knew his face was impassive, that he looked like a stone. Inside, he was a tangled knot. He had been running on high emotion for hours. Those had burned low. All that was left now was something raw, something that ached. When he looked at Rina, his heart swelled with it.

He missed his brother.

I wish you could see her , he thought, thinking *to* his brother in a way that he had not in a very long time. *I wish you could see them all.*

He looked at Lucia, the woman he was certain now his brother had been—if not in love with—at least very fond of. Without rage and hate and regret clouding his vision, he could see why. She was beautiful, of course—tall and full-bodied, dark haired, dark eyes, with skin like cream. She was also intelligent; shrewd even, but not unkind. But it was more than that. Lucia, like his brother, she was driven to something greater than herself, something that had given her hard edges, that had forced her to make harsh choices, for a better world. Itachi Uchiha had seen that in her. Of course he had. Itachi had always seen everything very clearly.

Not like me , he thought. *I have the power, but not always the vision. I always* think *I see everything better than those around me. But the truth is that I miss a lot, and often what is most important.*

He had almost missed Rina completely. Emotion had blinded him, as it often did. She had been under his nose for months and he had never really looked at her. Due to his prejudice, and his obsession with his own suffering, he almost hadn't seen her at all. He had no doubt now that this quiet, astute girl was his brother's child. He would not make that mistake again.

He turned to look for Sakura. She was behind him, giving instructions to the Genin to get Yukio to the hospital.

He waited until the children had started off, and then stepped forward, getting close to her, close enough to touch her, though he did not reach out.

"Sakura," he said.

She turned, startled.

"I want to talk," he said.

She hesitated.

It was slight, but he saw it—a tensing in her shoulders, a bit of a hunch—as if his words pained her. "I can't right now," she said, eyes flickering away. "I have to go to the hospital. There are injured to tend. I am needed there. Tomorrow maybe."

Tomorrow? Did he dare to wait that long? He couldn't risk...

"Are you still planning to leave the village?" he asked her.

She bit her lip. "I still think that is best. I mean, I heard what you said, that you want to talk, but what will we talk about?" Her eyes lifted to look at him. They were aqua green, a color he associated with summertime, bright and clear and lovely. "I don't want to hear that you don't want me to leave the village," she said. "Not if that's all you have to say. I want...more than that."

He didn't say anything. He was thinking, though. He remembered their fight. And now he was thinking rapidly about all the ways he had kept her from being close to him, all the ways he had shut her out. It wasn't because of her. It wasn't anything she had done wrong. He just had old wounds and deeper fears. He couldn't find any way to express them to her, and he was not sure he wanted to burden her

with them even if he could. He *wanted* to be everything that she needed, but…

"I have to go," she said when he didn't speak, and turned away.

He stood in the dust, watching her head toward the hospital, following the Genin.

His heart was beating hard.

I have to do something.

He found himself fighting just to breathe.

That was how Naruto found him.

"I have to stop her," Sasuke said firmly, with more conviction than he had felt in months. His heart was not only beating hard now. It was racing. Sweat beaded on his face. He wiped it away with his forearm. What was wrong with him? "I have to think of something to make her stay."

Naruto frowned. "If it is anything except that you love her and are ready to be with her forever… don't."

Sasuke stared at him.

"Don't," Naruto repeated. "You'll only string her along and she might legitimately try to kill you when she realizes it."

Sasuke couldn't seem to relax. His muscles were tense, clenched so hard his arms were shaking. Sweat was pouring down his face. His clothes were sticking to his body. His head was starting to swim.

"Sit down," Naruto said, guiding him toward one of the benches that sat scattered across the village. "You're having an anxiety attack. You need to calm down."

This had happened to Sasuke before, when Itachi had first arrived in the village, when he realized who he was. Nodding, Sasuke allowed Naruto to ease him down.

For several minutes, he just sat there, waiting for his body to cool off and his emotions to calm down. He knew this bench. He recognized it. His fingers brushed the white stone. He had left Sakura on a bench just like this when she had confessed to him for the first time that she loved him. And then he had left the village. Nothing she had said made any difference.

It would be fair , he thought, *if she did leave. After everything I said to her, how I've treated her… I need more time.*

"How do I get her to stay?" he asked quietly.

"You say 'I love you and I want us to be a family'."

"Naruto, it's not that easy. I've been thinking…something along those lines, but I can't yet. I'm not ready."

"Then don't say anything."

"She'll leave!"

"She had a right to," Naruto told him. "If you don't feel that way, then don't talk to her. Let her go to another village. She'll be fine."

Sasuke dropped his head in his hands. "I do feel that way. I'm just not ready. I love her. I don't want her to go. Doesn't that mean anything?"

"Of course it means something," Naruto said. "But you can't half-ass your relationship with her anymore. She's having your baby. If you can't be there for her, don't make her think otherwise."

"It's not that I don't…" Sasuke struggled to explain his feelings. "I don't want—" No. That was the wrong way to begin.

Naruto was silent, staring at him with those bright, piercing blue eyes that seemed to see even more than the Sharingan.

"I'm afraid," Sasuke said.

It was a raw confession. Uttering the words was like stripping off layers of dried flesh. What lay underneath was tender and sore.

"I do want to be with Sakura," he said. His tongue felt thick. "But I'm afraid of having a family."

Naruto looked unsurprised. "Well, okay."

"Okay?" Sasuke said, aghast. " *Okay* ? What's okay? What could possibly be okay about being afraid of the woman I want? Of being terrified of the child she's carrying?" He was shaking with enormity of it. "That's…that's what this has always been about."

"I know," Naruto said, so matter-of-factly that is surprised him. "But this is first time you admitted it."

Sasuke didn't know how to respond.

"What specifically are you afraid of?" Naruto asked him. "And don't give me any crock about being a bad husband or father. That's not it. That's an excuse. You can control that."

"Losing them," Sasuke answered instantly. "I'm afraid I will lose them. Or hurt them."

His hands were trembling. Naruto just listened.

"I'm afraid I won't ever be able to overcome how I feel about my brother, about what happened to my family, that I won't even be able to explain it. I'm afraid that I will hurt Sakura, and my child, that I will drive them away."

Naruto was quiet.

"But I'm more afraid of losing them," Sasuke added in quiet revelation. "I realized it when Rina was taken. She might have died, despite all my power. And despite everything I did, with all my rage, that kid Genin almost *did* die. You know that I just stood there? I just stood there, Naruto. Sakura saved that kid. I did nothing. If she hadn't come, he would have died. Rina would have watched it. And all the while I was thinking that if not for that kid, Rina would be dead already. And what if it was her? What if she was lying there, dying? Or already dead? My brother's daughter. What would I do? What is my power be good for? I couldn't think of anything."

"That's not going to happen, though," Naruto said firmly. "For lots of reasons, Sasuke. And I know you know the reasons. You wouldn't let anything happen to Sakura. You do have the power to protect her. And even if you didn't, it's unfair to Sakura to think she'd be *easy* to kill. If some deeply scarred part of you needed to pick someone really physically durable to love, you made a good choice. It just… it won't happen. Sakura will be fine. She's strong, with or without you."

"Yet it's all I can think about," he said. "Whenever I think of a future with her, or of children in general. Some terrible emotion creeps up from somewhere deep inside of me. I can't help but think I'm going to lose it all. I feel like I'm choking on that feeling, like it's pulling me down, killing me. I remember that place. I lived there for a long time. I don't want to go back there. And I don't want to bring that place to her."

"You were a child then. You're a man now."

"I know, but—"

"A child is coming," Naruto said. "Your child. So no matter what you fear, you have to be there. You *want* to be there, don't you?"

Sasuke shivered, not answering. But his shaking hands clenched into fists, and he gave a curt nod.

He had to find some way of working through this, of letting go of his fears, of letting go of his brother. The thought terrified him.

Yukio watched Sakura Haruno from beneath a thin cover of crisp white hospital sheets.

She stood at the foot of his bed, checking the paper stuck to the clipboard that hung from the iron rail of the bed frame. She read it in silence, not saying anything.

Yukio wondered what was making her brow furrow, right between the eyes.

"Is it bad?" he blurted, unable to contain his curiosity. He didn't *feel* as if he was dying anymore, but he had a lot of cuts and bruises and abrasions and he struggled to take deep breaths.

"What?" Sakura said. "Oh. No. I was thinking about something else. You're going to be fine. There's a trace amount of poison remaining in your system, but it's not enough to keep you here much beyond today. They'll probably let you go tomorrow."

Yukio heaved a sigh of relief.

"Although," Sakura said.

He straightened. "What?"

"Well, it may be nothing," she said. "But according to this, your heart has undergone some strain from the experience. It's not anything to worry about," she added hastily. "You're going to be able to do everything you've always done. But you will want to be careful for a while. Take it easy."

"Careful?" he said. The word felt strange in his mouth.

"Don't overdo it."

"But I *always* overdo it," he said. "It's my style!"

Sakura sighed. "Well, you can't right now. For at least a couple of weeks anyway, maybe months, you're just going to do things with a little less…style. Be more…I don't know…sensitive."

She left, taking the chart with her.

Yukio leaned back against the pillows, brooding. He had a lot to be grateful for. He was alive. He was going to make a full recovery. He had earned back some of his honor even. But he didn't like the thought of having to "take it easy." He had never taken it easy in his life. He had never let anyone else get away with it either. He was always pushing himself, forcing himself to do more, to achieve more.

How was he supposed to keep up with Itachi? The kid had a Sharingan. He'd learned two or three new jutsus just from this one mission, and he would learn many more, and much faster than Yukio could ever hope to. It wouldn't be long before Yukio's worst fear was realized: that this kid from another country—not even another village, but another *country* —would outclass him.

He chewed his lower lip, thinking furiously.

The door opened. It moved imperceptibly, swinging so softly on its hinges that he almost didn't notice. A shadow spilled into the room, a small shadow. It was followed by the hesitant steps of the girl.

He perked up instantly. "Hey," he said to Rina. "Fancy seeing you here."

She wore a purple dress—a frilly thing, un-ninja-like, with plum satin trimming and dark lace around the sleeves and the hem of the skirt. He kind of liked it. It was different. She softly shut the door. Her gaze traced the frame, seeming to linger on the details, before dropping slowly all the way to the tiles.

"Rina," he called to her. "Don't look down at your feet like that. I know you're thinking, but it makes you look weird. No offense."

She spooked. Wisps of straight dark hair clung to skin as her head jerked straight up. Her gaze jumped right to him. A blush stained her pale cheeks pink.

He winced. *Be more sensitive* , he thought. *Yeah right.*

He couldn't tell if she was shy or just strange. She seemed confident enough in the times that he had observed her in the village, but she was very quiet. Right now she was acting more oddly than usual.

"Why did you come to see me?" he said.

Her eyes darted away from his face and then back again. She took a breath. "I wanted to see if you were feeling better," she said. She kept her eyes on him, but it seemed hard for her to do.

"I'll be perfect soon enough," he told her. "How's your brother?"

"All right," she said. "He hasn't dropped the Sharingan, but he says he doesn't need to. His vision is perfect with it activated."

"Ah."

The kid was going to run around with the Sharingan *activated* all the time? How the hell was he going to keep up with that? So much for maybe catching Itachi with his guard down… He was going to have to find himself a teacher—someone skilled in Taijutsu perhaps. Yukio was never going to keep up on Ninjutsu alone and trying to beat a Sharingan with Genjutsu was a waste of time. He had to unlock something unique, some tricks that couldn't just be copied.

When my heart is better , he thought *. As soon as I'm able to push myself to my limits again, I'll start training.*

"I wanted to thank you," Rina said suddenly, interrupting his thoughts.

"Thank me?"

She nodded.

"You don't have to thank me," he said. "I'm just glad…" He paused, not sure what to say. Glad that she was alive? Glad that she hadn't been killed? Glad that he hadn't been responsible for her death? Glad that he had reached her before… that that Grass kid hadn't… that instead, he had…

His mind shied away from that train of that.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She approached the bed, moving with slipper softness across the floor. "I know," she said, and tears welled up in her eyes. "I know. And I'm—"

He stared at her, at the faint shimmer of undulating light in her eyes. He couldn't help thinking about it. He thought about it every few minutes, though he never let his mind linger.

He had killed.

It had felt nothing like he had imagined it would. He had thought, growing up as he had, that he was ready for death, for killing. It was battle after all. He had thought it would be great in a way, a kind of badge, and that having endured the death of his parents would make it seem like nothing. But it hadn't been like that. He didn't quite know how he felt. He just knew he thought about it a lot.

"It's okay," he told her. "You remember, right? What I told you? Don't ever be sorry."

She nodded wordlessly.

He leaned back against the pillows, eyes slipping closed. He was suddenly exhausted.

She touched his hand. He felt it, the brush of her fingers. He opened his eyes, startled, but she had already slipped out the door.

By the time Naruto had finished his work with the Grass and returned to Konoha, it was quite late and he was quite tired. It was a good kind of tiredness, the sort that came from a good amount of productivity. A lot had happened. But there was a lot to do yet.

He climbed the stairs to his office.

He stopped dead in the hall.

Lucia and the two Feudal Lords—Daichi and Hiroki—were sitting outside his door. They sat across from each other on opposite benches. The Feudal Lords glared at Lucia like a pair of angry dogs. She ignored them like a well-fed cat sitting high on a fence. When he entered the waiting room, all sets of eyes swung to him.

"Uh, hi," he said.

"Hokage!" Lord Hiroki, the younger of the two lords, said forcefully, standing up. "We must *insist* upon an audience!"

"You'll get one," Naruto said, grinning weakly. "Just as soon as today's business is-."

"Now," Lord Hiroki snapped.

Naruto frowned.

"Is this the real you?" Lucia murmured to him. "I've seen so many Narutos today."

"Only the real me handles official business," he said, shooting her a smile. He wondered if she believed that. "Lord Hiroki, your concerns are very important to me, but unfortunately, I've got business with the recent raid that I have to handle immediately. So if you'll all excuse me…"

Lucia inclined her head politely. Lord Hiroki seethed.

Naruto slipped between them, feeling rather odd to be so dismissive of such powerful parties, but he wasn't lying. Official business did await, and it was important. He walked into his office and shut the door behind him. He turned, back pressed up against the door, and whispered.

"Lucia and the Feudal Lords are sitting right outside!" he hissed.

He spoke to Shikamaru, the only other occupant in the room. His advisor's arm was bandaged, but other than that, he seemed fine. He was sitting in a padded chair on the other side of Naruto's desk, his good arm flung over the high back.

"I know," Shikamaru said. "I brought them. They said they won't leave until they get their audience with you."

Naruto slowly made his way around the room and sat in the chair behind his desk.

"But we need to discuss the Grass," Shikamaru said. "The crisis is officially over?"

"Over enough," Naruto said.

He had clones in the Grass still, and a good number of qualified Konoha Shinobi guards had been left behind to oversee things. The Grass's former leadership—a self-elected "council" of hardened Jounin—was either dead or had been taken prisoner, along with everyone in Marnix's retinue, which included a handful of even more terrified children and a family of three with the last name Lassen. These had been all brought back to Konoha. The children in particular were being well-cared for. The orders he had left with the Leaf Shinobi remaining at the Grass Village was to restore stability and start taking accounts from anyone who would talk about what had happened over the past few months. It would take some time to sort out.

Shikamaru regarded him levelly. "That's good, but what is the long term plan?"

"I don't want to destroy them," Naruto said. "I know that is what some will recommend, but that's not what I want to do."

"You can't just leave them alone either," Shikamaru warned. "If we withdraw, we will leave a leaderless, destitute and demoralized village on our border. Their Shinobi will turn to raiding and bandit work to feed their families and we will take the blame."

"I don't want that either," Naruto said. "I want to save them. Can't we work with them? We can join the villages together somehow. We can support them."

Shikamaru grunted. "That's noble, but we don't have the resources. We can barely sustain our own village, and at the rate we are growing, we won't even be able to do that in a few years."

"Have we learned anything from our prisoners?"

"The surviving members of the council mostly just curse us. I don't think they will be useful for much. Their own village doesn't seem to view them kindly, based on early reports. Then there's Juo and his team. Juo keeps asking for us to kill him. He asked last night and again this morning."

"Really?"

Shikamaru nodded.

"What do you make of that?" Naruto asked carefully. He had a suspicion about Juo.

"Juo's interesting," Shikamaru said. "I talked with him awhile, like you asked. And you're right. He's not quite what we thought. He's a hard man, but he cares for his village. I don't think he wants to die. I think

he wants to make himself a scapegoat. It might have been his plan all along, from the moment he came to Konoha."

"He meant to fail in kidnapping Rina?"

"No. But I think he knew it would go wrong, that the Grass would not get away with it, no matter what Marnix thought, and that someone would need to take the blame for the Grass. I think he planned from the beginning to be the one to die for it. He is highly respected, at least for what he does. I think he hoped that if he was killed in retribution, that the Grass would be allowed to survive. He seems to be holding to that belief."

Naruto tapped his fingers against the desk. "That is interesting," he said. He had thought so yesterday too. "What's our biggest obstacle where the Grass is concerned?"

Shikamaru rubbed a hand over his head. "The biggest problem? Honestly, it's a lack of leadership. The council that was in power killed the former heads. Most anyone of consequence in the village was either part of that coup or died as a result of it. We are in control now, but the Grass won't accept us ruling over them forever. Someone from the Grass needs to be in charge of the Grass, someone they trust."

"What if it was Juo?" Naruto asked.

Shikamaru blinked at him. "We just raided the Grass *because* of Juo. And he tried to assassinate Itachi."

"Under orders," Naruto said, waving a hand. "He's tough, but I didn't sense animosity in him. When Lucia paid him for that bet…" He shook his head. "I trust my instincts on this one, Shikamaru. I want to save the Grass. To do that, I need someone from the Grass who cares about the Grass to lead the village down a new path. From what you just said, Juo cares enough about the village to sacrifice himself for its welfare. And I think the village will listen to him—both

the old dogs and the younger, new thinkers. We could do a lot worse."

Shikamaru chuckled. "It's an idea," he said. "I'm sure he'll think you're mad, and he won't be the only one, but I can try prodding him—and his team—to see how they react to the idea. I'll learn a lot just from the conversation."

"Okay," Naruto said, lacing his fingers and stretching out his arms and hands. "What of our other prisoners?"

"We've got Gehard Berculo under lock and key. He wants to know what we are going to do with him, and has asked repeatedly to speak to Lucia, unsurprisingly."

"She hasn't asked to see him?"

"Not yet. Also, there's the Lassen boy, Jared. He also has a request."

Naruto didn't know much about this minor House. He had been intending to ask Lucia about them.

"The boy is apparently an old schoolmate of Itachi's. I was intending to send him and his family home along with the musician children and the rest of the foreigners, but the Lassen boy wants to stay in the village, as a civilian. And he wants his mother to be granted asylum to stay with him."

Naruto was surprised. "Really?

"That's what he said."

"Not his father?"

"No," Shikamaru said. "The family seems to have separated under the duress."

"I'll ask Lucia about it," Naruto said. "But I don't have any objections to the mother and son staying as civilians."

Even if Shikamaru disapproved, he didn't make any remarks. "Then that leaves only Lucia herself," Shikamaru said.

Naruto took a deep breath. "How long has she been waiting?"

"About an hour."

Naruto sighed. "And the Feudal Lords?"

"For all I know, they've been there since we left for the Grass."

They were going to be so mad. "Bring Lucia in first," he said.

Lucia took one of the padded armchairs in the Hokage's study. She sat gracefully across from him and Shikamaru, folding herself onto the cushions, one slippered foot bobbing as she crossed her legs.

Naruto eased back in the chair behind his desk. Shikamaru remained standing, leaning against the side of the desk with his arms crossed.

Naruto started by asking about her sister.

"I didn't know she would be here," Lucia explained. "I did know that she would come eventually. That was always the plan. If I was to ever leave, she was to wait as long as she could, until it was no longer safe, and then follow with her husband and any trusted servants she might have. I didn't know if it would be weeks or years for that to happen."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Naruto said. It was interesting to see Lucia on the defensive. She seemed to be earnestly trying to convince him that this was something she *hadn't* plotted. It was amusing to him in a way, He hadn't meant to put Lucia on the defensive. He has just been curious.

"I didn't think she would come to the village," Lucia added. "I thought she would set herself up in a nearby town or city and would write to me."

"She came just as you did—found wandering around in the woods," Naruto said, crossing his arms. "Kiba's team brought her in." Naruto had to laugh. "Don't worry about it. It's nice to see you have some family that you like. Do you think she'll want to settle here permanently?"

"I think she wants to be close," Lucia said. "But she doesn't necessarily have to live in the village. If you won't allow it, she would be content with someplace nearby, I'm sure. So would I."

Naruto blinked. "You aren't thinking of leaving, are you?"

"I will do whatever the village decides is best," she answered.

"Why would you think I would want you to leave?"

She seemed surprised. "Because I've caused you a lot of trouble," she said.

"If by trouble you mean the Grass, that's all going to be taken care of," he answered. Then he hesitated. "You should know that I'm not going to punish them. Their leaders—those that survived—have been deposed, but most of the Grass—."

"That's your decision," she answered calmly. She didn't seem upset. "I have my children back. I don't need retribution. The Grass is not my target."

Naruto noticed Shikamaru eyeing Lucia in a considering way. He gave Naruto a sharp look.

We'll follow up on that , he thought.

"I think you should stay here," Naruto continued, "and not just because of your children. You have more in common with the people

in this village than you realize. You will never find a group of people more accepting of having to make hard choices than Shinobi. The sooner you start letting us get to know you—the real you—the more you will see that." He leveled her with a steady gaze.

"That may be true," she murmured. "At any rate, you know most of my secrets now."

Naruto leaned forward, elbows on the table. "You told me in the Grass that you would tell us everything. What don't I know?"

Shikamaru grunted quietly.

Lucia's eyes were clear, like windows. He had never seen them like that before. He could clearly read her emotions. She was…relaxed. At ease.

"The inheritance," she said quietly. "Most of it you know already, but there are some details I can clarify. My family is wealthy, as you know, has always been wealthy. Most of our wealth comes from large reserves of silver. When my father was young, he traveled to this country looking for ventures. He made some investments that he kept these secret from the Higher Houses, against their doctrines, because he wanted to build something for the family that was outside of their political control. Those investments did well, better than anyone could have guessed. I inherited them."

"What are they?" Shikamaru asked. "Specifically where?"

"Here." She waved a hand around the room. "Everywhere."

Naruto blinked, confused. "Konoha?"

"No," Shikamaru said quickly. "We would have known if that was the case."

"In the Land of Fire," Lucia clarified. "Factories, mills, textiles."

"You told us that before," Shikamaru said. "I want the details."

"Initially, it was securities," Lucia said, "government bonds with stock ownership of businesses offered up as collateral if the loans defaulted. Stock ownership was a new concept for your lords, but at the time, they were desperate for cash. Their world was unstable and they needed money—spendable money—to sustain their armies. In a way, we were lucky to find each other. Your lords didn't want to take loans from their hostile neighbors. My family had no need of immediate returns. Conditions were favorable to both parties, so we traded."

"What were the terms?" Shikamaru asked. "High rates, I assume, so that when the lords defaulted, they gave your family control of these businesses?"

"Partial control," Lucia said. "In exchange for wagonloads of silver, we took majority ownership in factories manufacturing everything from steel blades to cloth shirts. The Feudal Lords felt they weren't risking much, because they backed their securities with businesses they could stand to lose."

"Not Konoha," Naruto said.

"No," Lucia agreed. "Not Konoha. However, the silver we provided to the Feudal Lords was used to fund the growth of your village, so in a way…" She shrugged.

"There must have been something special about the collateral, though," Shikamaru said. "They're in quite a tizzy over your presence here."

"At the time, what was special about them was how lousy they were," Lucia said.

Shikamaru raised an eyebrow.

Naruto was a little confused by all this finance talk. Securities and bonds meant something different to him than to Lucia. But he was following along.

"Your lords thought they were being clever," Lucia said. Her lips twisted in a wry smile. "They backed their securities with distressed assets. They figured that even if they could not pay us back, that what we collected upon the default of the loan would be of small loss to them. They thought we didn't know."

"What do you mean?" Naruto said. "Distressed…?"

"A business that is doing poorly," Lucia explained. "Due to inefficiencies, poor leadership, rising cost of materials, a market that is in decline, or bad debt the business can't pay off, often some combination. For example, there is a smithy on my books now that can't pay for the iron it needs to produce steel. When peace came, the market for weapons dried up in the area, so now this business is struggling."

Naruto nodded thoughtfully.

"These are the types of businesses that first my father—and then myself—collected when the Land of Fire defaulted. The Feudal Lords did not think much of them since the businesses cost more to run than they earned. They were failing. And besides, they were only giving us partial ownership. They figured that should we be able to squeak anything out of them, they would profit, and it would also still be taxable."

"Why would you agree to that?" Naruto asked. "That sounds like a terrible deal."

Lucia smiled. "For one thing, they were cheap. We got many shares of many businesses in exchanges for our silver, and at very good prices. What your Feudal Lords didn't understand is that turning around struggling assets is what we *do* . It is the core of my family's business. My father always had a good eye for a venture. He had a keen instinct for which businesses would be profitable when given the right care. He taught me that. Every struggling asset we obtained for our loans was worth *something* . We looked over the books carefully. We knew which businesses to dismantle or change and

which to build back up. Most importantly, we had the resources to do it, which is what your Feudal Lords did not fully understand. Though initially very expensive, over ten or twenty years, a portion of them—not all of them survived—became very very profitable."

Naruto frowned.

"Consider the smithy," Lucia said. "This business needs loans for the iron, so we provide that. In addition to the loans, we also work with the business on what it manufactures and where it sells those goods. The demand for weapons has abated, but the demand for steel is still high. We have ample connections in the marketplace so we can facilitate deals that the smithy was not aware were possible. At the moment, we are focused on shifting production to steel barrels and ship parts."

"Barrels?" Naruto asked.

Lucia nodded. "Steel barrels are actually lighter and cheaper than wood ones."

"I see," Shikamaru said, nodding. "So the partial ownership of all these businesses passed to you, and you—"

"Bought more," Lucia said, "and obtained larger shares, sometimes full ownership, and then bought more, and so on. Like my father, I have an eye for the business."

"So why are you so hated?"

Lucia looked wistful, staring past Naruto, but really looking a place in her mind that he could not see. "That wasn't my plan. I named the institution that finances my ventures White Rain. I thought of it as a cleansing thing, a sort of renewal or rescue. But that is not how I became known."

"We've heard quite a few colorful names applied to you," Shikamaru said.

"Yes," she said, nodding. "The Vulture is quite a popular one, I hear."

"For picking at the dead or dying," Shikamaru said. "I assume the businesses you bought didn't appreciate you taking them over."

"No," she said. "I brought change, sometimes hard change. My… advice…was not always welcome."

"But they needed your money."

"Yes," she said. "You will have heard that I am ruthless, that I don't care about the people in the companies I purchase, that I only care about money. It's not entirely unfounded criticism. I watch the books and I make many decisions that result in other people losing so that I can gain. Not every business could be saved. Many had made more decisions or were holding onto old ways of doing things that were no longer viable. For these, it was better to dismantle the business, or at least oust the leadership and start again. They hate me for that and I can't blame them. But these businesses needed change in order to survive in a changing world."

Like the Grass , Naruto thought with sudden clarity. *It's a similar problem. They feared change, and that fear made them make terrible deals and do terrible things. Sometimes you have to take something apart in order to rebuild it. Not everyone will thank you, even if it's necessary, not even if it's the best thing for them* .

"And you profited," Shikamaru said.

"Grandly," Lucia agreed. "I won't apologize for that. Profit was my goal. It took the Feudal Lords awhile to realize just how much my wealth had grown. I obtained a lot of influence over the economy. I was able to remove people from places of power that they had carefully positioned in order to get my way on some deal or another. At times, my ventures got in the way of their politics. And I control a frightful amount of their country's assets for a private entity, if you look at my investments holistically."

"And the last thing they want is for you to be anywhere near their military center," Shikamaru said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "Peaceful times or not. We aren't that different from one of your… usual projects."

Naruto perked up at this. That was true. He had been concentrating so hard, thinking about the Grass, that he had missed that.

"But you must have known that they would never allow you any part of Konoha," Shikamaru said. "So what was your intent in coming here?"

Now we get to it , Naruto thought, his exuberance dampening a little. *She's explained what she's done. But what does she want to do?*

"My intent is to destroy the Higher Houses," she said. "I need a lot of money to do that. More than you can imagine. It has taken ten years —a short time, really—to build my empire."

"Empire?"

Lucia nodded.

"You don't mean a government," Shikamaru said slowly.

"I mean wealth grand enough to *contend* with government," Lucia said. "I mean to build a House greater than any Higher House, greater than all the Higher Houses put together. I mean to have wealth so immense as to be a fortress unassailable. I don't care how many enemies I make in the process. I don't care much at all how I am perceived. That doesn't matter. It has never mattered."

Naruto had difficulty imagining that much money, or what the cost of success would be, but it didn't sound dissimilar from war. "What does matter?" Naruto asked in a quiet voice.

"Justice."

"Justice," Shikamaru murmured. He still had his arms crossed. He wore a vaguely contemplative look on his face. "So all of this is to avenge your parents? Why not just hire assassins?"

"And kill who?" Lucia said. "Everyone was culpable in some way. I know uncovered enough about it to know that much. But I am not yearning for blood. I mean to instigate *change* —real, systemic change. That can't happen through the current laws, in the current corrupt system. The Higher Houses reign above all. People with that much money cannot be persecuted for crimes, even when they can be obviously tied to them, and in most cases, they can't be tied, not directly. Even when they are, it is always someone else—someone with less power—who takes the fall. At most, the Houses pay fines, and the amounts—though they might seem high to you—are of little consequence to them, certainly not any kind of deterrent."

"I understand," Naruto said. "They're strong, so you need greater strength to beat them."

"But not military strength," Lucia said. "The war I wage will be on their assets. It is an economic war. I win by whittling down their influence, bit by bit."

"Hmm," Shikamaru said. "Out of curiosity, why not just raise an army? Why not kill everyone and set yourself up as ruler, to make the laws as you wish them to be?" He shrugged. "You could have."

"No," Lucia said. "I find war to be distasteful. It benefits the invaders, not the invaded, and arguably not even them. It is the innocent and the poor that suffer the most. Besides which, there would be too much reliance on other powers that I cannot control. Armies that fight only for money are the worst kind."

Shikamaru nodded. "But you did think of it."

"I thought of many things." She paused. "I may have considered it more favorably—military intervention, I mean—before I met Itachi. But after knowing him…" She trailed off. "He never spoke of it

directly, but I could tell that the wars here had deeply scarred him. No. I do not think war is an option."

"Well," Naruto said. "So what happens now? You beat Marnix. Won't the Higher Houses be on their guard against you?"

"Marnix didn't know my strength," Lucia said. "He thought I was joking when I said I have built an empire, but I know his worth. I can bury his House, and those that might come to his aide. They won't see me coming. They think I just want to be free."

Shikamaru turned his head, giving Naruto a significant look.

"What is your plan?" Naruto asked her.

"I am playing a long game," Lucia said. "One that might take most of my life. I will wait until these recent affairs die down, and for my children to get a little older, but eventually, I will make my move on the Higher Houses. Slowly by surely, I will extend my empire into their lands. It will start small—a sentimental business here, a profitable venture there, but it will expand. One House or another will catch on eventually, and they will fight back, but the Houses won't unify against me and they won't know the extent of my resources. Since no one I love lives there any longer, they will find it difficult to intimidate me. I will play it until every Higher House is humbled."

"Eventually, they'll get aggressive," Shikamaru said. "They'll send assassins after you. And your kids."

"Yes," Lucia said quietly. "Eventually."

"And that's why you brought them here," Naruto murmured. "You want your kids to be hard to kill."

"Indeed," Lucia said, nodding. "That's why I sought a Shinobi for the father—one with a kekkai genkai." Then she shook her head. "I never intended Itachi or Rina to become ninja in order to further my personal vengeance," she said. "I just wanted to protect them from it.

I knew of the powers of Shinobi. My father had spoken of them to me. I thought—what better preparation could I give to protect them from assassins than to give them such gifts? But I also knew they would have to be trained in those gifts, so I plotted to bring them here, hoping there would be a way. They won't be targets for a while, not until I start making moves, but assailants will come eventually. I wanted the legacy of their father to protect them."

Naruto thought on that silently. "It likely will," he said. "There's not much that can stand against a Sharingan. If Itachi has one, Rina is sure to as well. They'll train here and they'll be safe."

"But you also didn't really mean them to be Leaf Shinobi," Shikamaru said. "You wanted them trained, but you never really meant to relinquish them to us. You mean them to inherit your empire."

Lucia looked at him. "That's true," she admitted. "I agreed to your rules in arrogance. I thought at the time that you could really have no commanding power over me, or my children. My wealth is woven so intricately into this country that the Feudal Lords themselves would ask you to release them, if I requested it. But I underestimated you. I underestimated the Hokage."

Naruto smiled.

"When I first met you," Lucia told him. "I thought you were a fool. You seemed so eager, so trusting. I thought that surely this could not be the man of legend I had heard so much about."

Naruto smile widened into a grin.

"But I learned," Lucia said. "It was me who could not see clearly. I had little knowledge of Shinobi arts and far less of your power particularly. But more than that, it was your person that convinced me of my mistake. You might dream bigger than I do. I had never met anyone like that before."

Flattery? Naruto wondered. But, no. She was being utterly serious.

"As it is," Lucia said. "I will honor our original agreement. Rina and Itachi will remain a part of the village, though I will also wish them to inherit my empire. You should see the advantage there, I trust."

Naruto nodded. "I'll confess too," he said. "I underestimated you as well. You've got expertise that I don't have. I'd like you to listen to my plan for Konoha, if you don't mind. The Feudal Lords said they would put it in front of the Daimyo, but they didn't seem that enthusiastic. I am worried they will reject our requests."

He broke off as Lucia smiled. Genuinely smiled. There was real delight in her eyes. Joy. It transformed her entire face. "If I don't mind?" she asked. "Hokage, my children are alive because of you. My plans have been saved because of you. I no longer feel alone and afraid because of you. You have whatever you want from me, as much as you want, for as long as you want. Yes, I would like to see your plan. And I am confident that if you take my advice and present again to the Feudal Lords, that they will not refuse you anything."

Shikamaru's eyebrows shot up. He straightened up, his arms unwinding. "You sound pretty certain about that," he said.

Lucia's eyes twinkled. "I guarantee it."

Naruto looked at Shikamaru. He just shrugged.

"How about now?" Naruto asked her.

She nodded.

Naruto made no changes to his presentation. It was the same as what he had delivered to the Feudal Lords before, over tea with Hinata and Shikamaru acting as his attendants. It boiled down to asking the Feudal Lords for more money—twice again what they usually gave to Konoha—so they could build a new program that would educate Shinobi in skills other than war. That way, the village could keep growing, even in times of peace.

Lucia listened without interruption. She sat in a chair, legs crossed under a long white silk skirt, one elbow on the back of the chair, cheek resting on the back of her hand. She didn't say anything for the entire presentation.

When he finished, Lucia remained silent for a few minutes. Naruto glanced uncertainly at Shikamaru, but his advisor was just as stone-faced, watching Lucia with crossed arms.

"Well," Lucia said after a moment. "That won't do."

It felt a little like she had kicked the wind out of him. "Why?"

"The idea is good," she said. "But we need to change your approach. You keep talking about a desire to keep your people employed and create new opportunities for your young people. The Feudal Lords don't care about that."

"We know," Shikamaru said. "They told us."

"But they will care," she said, "if you frame it right. What the Feudal Lords want is to expand profits and save on costs. You should say that Konoha wants to explore new markets. Konoha is expanding. You are not begging for money. You are asking them to make an investment."

He stared at her. "But that's no different at all," he protested. "That's exactly what I said."

"No," she disagreed. "That's what you *meant* , but you said it differently. Presentation is everything. Don't talk about how much it costs or how different or difficult it will be. People don't want to buy things that are risky. Talk about growth. Talk about revenue. Talk about expanding territories, happier and more productive civilians, taxable industries. You are not asking the Feudal Lords for money to operate. You are asking them to make an investment so that they can profit in new ways. And from that investment, you will project returns of forty times or greater than they are getting now."

" *Forty* ?"

"Yes," Lucia said.

"But we can't promise that. I'll barely be able to get the program running…"

"Well that was the first thing that I was going to recommend," she said. "You are not asking for enough, not nearly. You should be asking for ten times what you are getting from them now."

"Ten? When they already said they haven't the money for this?"

"Ten at least," Lucia continued. "They do have the money. I happen to know that they do."

"Ten times," Naruto muttered. "With forty percent returns?

Lucia nodded. "To achieve that, you will have to charge more for Shinobi services."

"But they're experimental."

She did not seem to have heard him. "Double, I should think."

" *Double* ?" Now he was truly flummoxed. "You think our clients will pay twice for Shinobi who build bridges than what they pay for assassins?"

"Yes," Lucia said. "I would. Bridges bring trade, and bridges built by ninja will be finished faster. Of course, you will need to teach Shinobi how to build bridges first. Consultants will be needed for that, apprenticeship programs with architects and so on for all of your new solutions. You will need to give them a cut of the business as well—the architects, I mean."

Naruto just stared.

Shikamaru crossed his arms. "What else do you suggest?"

Lucia had a lot to say. They talked for a while. Naruto asked a lot of questions and kept asking them until he felt he understood everything. Lucia was very patient, calmly repeating her advice when he forgot it and providing illustrations and examples when he struggled to understand. At length, Naruto felt reasonably assured that he knew what to do.

"Shikamaru," he said. "Bring in the Feudal Lords."

"Are you sure?" Shikamaru said, his eyebrows climbing. "You don't want to give it a day to practice? The future of the village is riding on their response."

"I'm sure," Naruto said. "They want an audience now. We'll miss our chance if we don't do this immediately. Lucia is here. And I know what I need to say. Besides, you know I won't *practice* ."

Shikamaru smiled a little. "All right," he said, and made his way to the door.

Naruto met Lucia's eyes across the table. They were calm, resolute, and sparkling.

She guaranteed it , he thought, wondering what she meant by that.

The Feudal Lords walked into the room. They came as a regal pair, side by side, bedecked in formal robes and pointy hats. They somehow managed to look both serene and offended. Naruto was underdressed by comparison. He hadn't planned on this meeting and hadn't had time to change since his return from the Grass. He hadn't overexerted himself in battle, she he looked about the same as he always did, but not as formal as he could look, the way he had looked the last time he had met with the Feudal Lords. He was missing his hat.

But this is better , he thought. *I over prepared for that last meeting. I was nervous. I even let myself be a little supplicant. The Hokage*

doesn't have to be supplicant to the Feudal Lords. We should be a team. And my plan is a good idea.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Naruto said. "It wasn't intentional."

They both frowned at him. Then they turned those frowns on Lucia.

"What is she doing here?" Lord Hiroki asked. "We'd prefer to speak with you privately."

"Why?" Naruto asked. "Are you going to tell me something she doesn't know?"

Hiroki and Daichi exchanged glances.

"I think I know everything I need to," Naruto said, "including how much influence she has in the Land of Fire, how she got it, and why it makes you nervous. So we might as well speak frankly."

The Feudal Lords exchanged glances. But then they nodded their assent.

Shikamaru fetched a couple of extra chairs from the side of the room and set them before the Hokage's desk. Lucia remained in the one she had been in already, though it had been moved to the corner of the desk so the Feudal Lords could take the two chairs directly in front of Naruto. Despite the welt on Lucia's face, which had been reduced considerably by ninja healers, she managed to exert just as much regality as the Feudal Lords.

"We can't allow an alliance between Lucia Van Alsyne and Konoha," Lord Daichi said. "That is the long and the short of it. She must go."

"There is no alliance," Naruto said.

"You aren't in negotiations to take money from her?" Hiroki snapped.

"No," Naruto said. "Not beyond what she's paid for asylum anyway."

"And you aren't going to supply her with military troops?" Daichi asked warily.

"Not beyond what woman might require for safe escort. A few skilled Shinobi to protect her and her loved ones as needed, but no more."

"What of this invasion of the Grass?" Daichi demanded. "Have you not entered into military action on her behalf already?"

"That wasn't for Lucia," Naruto said. "That was for my own. An Academy student was kidnapped. We retrieved her."

"Lucia's daughter!"

"A student of Konoha," Naruto said firmly. "A child of one of our own Shinobi."

The Feudal Lords were silent, but their pursed lips and tense muscles told him that they were not pleased. It also told him that they knew that Lucia had had children by a Konoho Shinobi. They did not condone Naruto claiming those children for the village.

"I'm going to protect my people," Naruto told them. "Always. That's not under discussion. But I am not in any kind of partnership with Lucia to provide military support. She has never requested that."

"Nor will I," Lucia murmured.

"Words are all very well," Lord Daichi huffed, not even sparing a glance for Lucia. "But we would feel much better if she was not here."

Naruto felt his temper flash, but Lucia spoke before she could. She spoke very calmly, almost playfully. "Come now," she said. "You know very well that I manage almost all of my schemes by correspondence. I would think you would *prefer* me operating out of your military stronghold. That way you can be certain that I am being watched."

Shikamaru smiled a little. He seemed to think that clever.

Lord Hiroki sputtered. Lord Daichi grimaced.

"Doesn't matter," Naruto said. "If I say she can stay, she stays." He dismissed the matter with a clap of his hands. "Now that that's settled, there's something else I would like to discuss."

The Feudal Lords looked like they both wanted to spit.

"It regards our last meeting," Naruto said.

"The Daimyo will not relish the idea," Lord Daichi said. "But we will ask on your behalf."

"That's the same as a no," Shikamaru said.

Naruto nodded. "Besides, I have revised my proposal. The world is changing. You have made that very clear to me in our recent discussions. The ninja way of life cannot continue as it has. It's insupportable in times of peace. Our services simply aren't needed in the degree that they used to be."

Lord Daichi and Lord Hiroki both nodded in unison.

"And yet Konoha can't be dismantled," Naruto said. "You must pay us something. We must be ready and able to defend the Land of Fire in times of strife. The secrets of the Shinobi Arts have to continue in some respect."

More nods.

"For now, the Land of Fire is thinking about its future. You want to direct your resources to rebuild this country after all the war it has endured. Innovation and industry is your focus now."

"Yes," Lord Daichi said carefully, crossing his arms. He was frowning, but not as if he was unhappy. It was more of a pensive

expression. He was waiting for Naruto was going to say next. "We discussed this."

Naruto folded his hands across the desk. He counted to three, not saying anything, just letting the silence build anticipation—another tidbit of advice from Lucia.

"The Land of Fire has an opportunity," he repeated. "I think I explained it poorly before."

Hiroki guffawed. "I think I see now what you are doing!" he declared. "You are stoking our interest, talking of innovation, but soon you will tell us that war breeds innovation." He stroked his beard. "In truth, it often does," he said. "But I think not this time. We don't need more Shinobi arts. We need—"

"Bridges," Naruto said. "Causeways. Irrigation. Mountain passes. Canals. Long work. Hazardous. But Shinobi can do these things with jutsu. And we can do it much faster. Imagine a single day of labor for a bridge." He shrugged. "Once we get good at it anyway."

"A *day* ?" Hiroki exclaimed. "That is impossible. Unless the bridge is very small, of course, but that would be useless. What we will need is—"

"I understand what you need," Naruto told him. "And I promise you that I am not exaggerating. Of course, it will take an initial investment. My people have been using the Shinobi arts exclusively for war for a long time. It will take new programs for Shinobi to learn such skills."

"A day," Lord Daichi murmured. "I'll admit, I am not well versed on everything that Shinobi can do. Your arts are very secret after all."

"We must protect the art," Naruto said. "It's our competitive advantage."

"Yes, well…" His voice was dry and dusty. He coughed. "The idea has merit, as I said before, but it will be expensive and risky. We must ask the Daimyo."

Naruto took a deep breath. This was the part he felt less sure about.

"This isn't an expense. It's an investment," he said. "And to do it right, I need more than I first proposed. I need ten times what the Feudal Lords usually provide the village each year."

Lord Hiroki half rose from his seat, shock on his face. "Ten times?" he bellowed.

Lord Daichi didn't move. He studied Naruto silently, but his frown had deepened.

Remembering Lucia's advice, Naruto didn't react to their reaction. He just went on, very calmly, very reasonably. "Ten times," he said, "to fund ventures into new markets. It will take some time, but if we do this right, you will see returns." He took a breath. "Forty percent."

Lord Daichi's eyebrows shot up. "Hmm," he said. "That is an attractive figure, but it will take more than time. If this mad plan is to have any success at all, you will need to develop a whole new client base, and interact with them far differently than you do now. Ordinary folk are more than a little afraid of Shinobi, and for good reason. It will not be easy."

"With resources and support, we can do it," Naruto urged.

"This is absurd," Lord Hiroki objected. "Who would trust Shinobi to do such things? Why are we even discussing it? It is too big a change; it carries too much of a risk. Shinobi have no customers for this kind of work, and no references. Who would trust them? Killers building bridges? It will not succeed. Daichi, to agree to this proposal would be madness. We do not need to do this."

Lord Daichi was quiet. He did not object.

"We can build partnerships," Nartuo said. "We are very friendly with a highly respected bridge architect, in fact. I am sure—"

"It was a fanciful idea," Lord Hiroki interrupted. "But far too foolish."

Was? Naruto felt himself start to deflate.

"You're the foolish ones," Lucia murmured.

It was the first thing she had said since assuring them that she would never ask Konoha for armies. The Feudal Lords both turned to look at her in surprise, as if they had forgotten she was even there. She regarded them frankly, her chin propped up on her fist.

"Blind and foolish," she said. "This is a golden opportunity. Small wonder, though, if you can't spot it."

Lord Hiroki narrowed his eyes. "You insult us so directly?"

"How can I not? You have everything here," she said, waving a hand, "that makes a venture attractive to an investor. All the checkboxes are checked: a viable idea, a reasonable plan to support its development, extraordinary talent, strong leadership. What's more, this Hokage has everything you could possibly ask for in an entrepreneur: energy, passion, talent, and the trust of his people. You think him young and foolish, and let that distress you, but that is what people like me look for."

"You *look* for young and foolish?"'

"Dreamers," she said, nodding. "Only young and foolish men dare to dream this big. You are conservative. You need people like him to spend your money. Left to your own devices you will just hide it in a hole or squander it."

Hiroki seemed caught between flabbergasted and outraged. Lord Daichi, though… he looked to be considering what Lucia had said.

"Fund him," she said. "The possibilities are limitless. Just think on it. Dream a little. You can own the projects and sub-contract them to Konoha to complete. The people will trust their government, thereby removing the stigma of killers without references. You take the risk and your people get what they need—and faster than they could ever imagine. You will make money, the economy will grow, and all the while you will also be funding an advanced military, the size of which will be utterly secret because in a few generations no one will be able to tell which Shinobi are architects and which are soldiers."

Lord Daichi's face lit up. He looked almost…scared…by the possibilities Lucia had just outlaid. But in a moment, his fear turned to wonder. And then to excitement.

Lord Hiroki still looked piqued. He opened his mouth to object.

Lucia rode right over him. "And if you don't fund him, I will."

"You can't do that," Lord Hiroki objected. "We won't condone a contract…"

Lucia shrugged. "I'll make it a gift then."

Lord Hiroki's eyes bulged. "A gift?" he laughed. "No one would give away that much!"

But Lucia didn't blink. "What do you think the life of my child is worth to me?"

Lord Hiroki fell silent. She would do it. It was clear to anyone who knew her even a little bit that she was being perfectly honest. It was more money that Naruto could even imagine. But Lucia didn't seem even the slightest bit concerned.

Shikamaru looked tense. His arms were no longer crossed and he was staring intently at Lucia.

At length, Lord Daich laid an old, withered hand on Lord Hiroki's arm. "That will not be necessary," he said. "I think we can agree to this plan. Even without your…threat…I am intrigued. The Daimyo will fund this. It will be expensive at first, but in a few generations…." He shook his head. "Well, no one can see that far into the future, not even Shinobi, but something tells me this is an offer we dare not refuse."

He rose abruptly, brushing off his robes. Lord Hiroki stood with him. Naruto and Lucia followed suit.

"You will get your ten," Lord Daichi said formerly. "But for now, my old bones are tired. A body can stand only so much excitement." He inclined his head first to Naruto, who returned it, and then to Lucia. "Come, Hiroki," he said, and began walking toward the door.

Lord Hiroki gathered his dignity around him. He fell in beside Lord Daich, practically floating on a cloud of huffiness. Shikamaru moved ahead of them and opened the door. Lord Daichi chuckled as he walked through it, as if catching on belatedly to a clever joke.

As soon as the door shut, Naruto let himself fall heavily back into his chair. He felt like his whole body was buzzing. He turned to look at Lucia, not bothering to mask his amazement, or his gratitude. "Your guarantees are good," he said.

Lucia laughed. It was a pure sound, light and airy, edged with delight. Naruto wasn't sure he had ever heard her laugh before. Not a real laugh. He sat up quickly in his chair.

"Lucia," he said, grinning. He was starting to feel giddy; his village wasn't just going to survive…it was going to thrive! He made his observation out loud, not even pausing to think of it. "It's nice to see you happy."

Her laughter cut off. She stared at him, surprised by what he had said. Her eyes were big and round, like twin dark moons.

It took him a moment to understand. She had not thought it was possible for her to be happy.

"Hey, Lucia," he said quietly, in a more solemn tone. "You said you would give me anything I asked, right?"

"If it's within my power," she said. "Ask."

"Would you talk to Sasuke?"

"About what?"

"Everything. I think he's ready."

TBC

Thank you for reading chapter 26! Wow, this is a long story, so good job. As mentioned in the introduction, I've written more of the ending, but it got so long, I broke it into two pieces. As always, I'm very interested in feedback from my readers! I know there are a number of people who read and don't like to review, either because they don't know what to say or for some other reason, but as this story draws to a close it would be nice to know what you think! You can consider it a happy birthday present too! I just turned a year older.

Normally this is where I thank all my previous reviewers, but I am currently on a plane and do not have internet access, so I can't go through and look everyone up. If you reviewed the last chapter, thank you very much! Trust me—I read them all…multiple times. Thank you!

Scenes from this chapter to comment on:

Cecile's arrival and Rina's piano

Yukio's recovery

SasuSaku

Lucia's empire

The future of Konoha

Last chance to remind me of any loose ends you want covered that haven't been addressed yet… I'm going to wrap this up!

The End

Well, I finished it. It took a long time, but finished it. I don't have any good excuses. It is what it is. For anyone who gets the alert and cares to see how the loose ends were resolved, please read on to see how this overlong story wraps up. This is the final chapter.

White Rain

Chapter 27

By Zapenstap

Yukio waited two weeks. Sakura hadn't specified how many weeks he needed to recover, so two seemed like a good time to start training again. He limbered up, doing his usual stretches, and then moved into his regular morning workout: running laps at the school yard, pushups, pull-ups, the monkey bars, squats, crunches, consecutive high kicks with weights, then target practice with his kunai, balancing exercises, forms, and more laps after that.

Afterward, he lay on the ground, staring at the blue sky above, breathing hard. His heart felt fine, but his thoughts floated in a haze of disquiet.

It wasn't going to be enough.

Whenever he closed his eyes, all he could see was Itachi's Sharingan, the two tomoe swimming around each other like black koi fish in a red water pool.

Rock Lee was training. He was in the middle of one thousand kicks, snapping his leg against the padded tree at exactly the same spot one thousand times. If he missed a kick, or missed the spot, he would have to start over. These days, he hardly ever missed

anymore, though. He had to make longer and more strenuous routines to make up for it.

He was starting the 800s when he was interrupted.

He turned, somewhat pleased at the thought of having to start over from the beginning, and addressed the Genin who had shouted his name so insistently.

"It is rude to interrupt a Jounin in training, young Yukio," Rock Lee admonished him.

The kid was breathing hard, sweat shining on his face, dark hair damp about his forehead, but his eyes were alight with the energy of youth.

"I want you to train me," Yukio gasped between breaths.

Rock Lee stared at him.

He had not had many personal exchanges with Yukio. The boy was popular with the other students and very talented—skilled in Ninjutsu and Taijutsu, particularly for his age, and decent with Genjutsu, though he did not seem to have a passion for illusions. Everyone knew he would be a star Shinobi someday; if he could learn proper discipline and respect, he might rise very high.

"Me?" Rock Lee said incredulously.

He had always assumed that if he were to take on a student, to form that almighty bond between student and teacher, that it would be with someone like himself—a loser with no talent and little ability that he could transform into a genius through hard work, the way Guy Sensei had done with him. He had searched for such a student, but had not yet found one willing to endure the rigors of his style of training, who wanted it with the Will of Fire. He toyed with the idea that perhaps he might even have son, but even if he met the right girl tomorrow, it would be at least a few years before he could start

training a child of his own. In the meantime, this…this was unexpected.

"Why?" he added.

"Because you're the best," Yukio said, as if surprised that there was a question. "You are a master of the eight chakra gates! Your Taijutsu can stand up to the Sharingan. That's what I need!"

Rock Lee stared at him. "The Sharingan?"

"Taijutsu!" Yukio said impatiently. "I have to keep up with Itachi."

"Ah!" Rock Lee said in a sudden burst of understanding. "A rival. You need to master Taijutsu to keep up with your rival, who has a Sharingan!"

"That's what I just said!"

Rock Lee nodded wisely. "I too chose the owner of a Sharingan as my rival," he said, clasping his arms behind his back and nodding. "But though I became a splendid ninja, I was not able to defeat Sasuke—unless you count the first time we fought, when he was not prepared, but that match was cut short."

Yukio looked absolutely desperate at this news.

"However!" Rock Lee added, whipping out one arm and holding up a single finger wrapped in white strips of cloth. "I also have not had occasion to fight Sasuke recently. Who is to say how that match would fare? Moreover, you are young. I started with less talent than you have now, and Itachi has less training that you do, so perhaps, with continuous hard work—"

"I can work hard," Yukio blurted. "As hard as I have to. Harder. What do I have to do?"

Rock Lee blinked.

This is it, he thought with some surprise. *This is the overflowing fountain of youthful energy I have been seeking in a student! It is not the student I expected, but even so...* Surprise was overrun by a spouting well of joy. Why should he not teach someone with natural talent?

"You must run ten miles," Rock Lee said, "without stopping. If you stop, you must do twenty."

Yukio nodded. He was poised on the balls of his feet. He looked ready to go right now.

"And when you are done warming up," Rock Lee continued, stretching his arms side to side. "Return here and we will begin your real training."

Juo spent thirteen nights in a Konoha holding cell. It was a pleasant prison, as far as prisons went. He would know; it was not the first prison he had seen.

He didn't try to break out. He didn't complain. He was polite to the guards. Occasionally, he asked when retribution for the transgression of the Grass would be decided upon, and when his trial and execution could be arranged. These requests—he was told—were passed directly to the Hokage, but nothing came of it.

He spent his time in meditation, cross-legged on the dusty floor, staring between the bars of his holding cell in silence. He ate and drank what he was given and made no trouble. His thoughts were always on the Grass, and on the companions who had followed him into failure. He was told they were being held peaceably in similar cells, though not near enough where he could speak to them. He only hoped they would not also have to die, though he knew they would be willing if it meant the rest of the Grass Village would be spared.

When he was not worrying, Juo's thoughts turned to the foreign woman, Lucia Van Alstyne, and the feel of the coin purse she had pressed into his palm. It had been an ordinary purse, but the memory of it was burned into his mind like a brand. Against all expectation, she—who had been touted by her own people as a greedy harlot—had paid her debts on their bet, even though the boy had been maimed and the girl kidnapped and almost killed. He could not quite riddle her out.

He was thinking on this when the Hokage's advisor came to see him.

Juo remembered Shikamaru. He was difficult to forget, despite looking as if he ought to be forgettable. Everyone knew of him. His clan was well-known, but even more well-known was his strategic mind and how close he was to the Hokage's ear. Juo contemplated his approach with interest.

Shikamaru squatted before his prison cell, looking at Juo from between the bars.

He and Shikamaru regarded each other for a few moments in silence.

"Still want to die?" Shikamaru asked him.

"That isn't quite what I requested," Juo responded.

Shikamaru nodded, looking around lazily. "Yeah, I know. You want to take the blame for the Grass, but it amounts to asking for an execution."

Juo said nothing. That was true.

Shikamaru frowned slightly.

"Here's the thing," Shikamaru said. "The Hokage isn't really interested in blame and punishment. He wants to make certain that something like this never happens again."

Juo felt a chill creep over him. Would the Leaf raze the Grass? Would they kill everyone, down to the last child? That was the only way to be sure that something like this would never happen again, and he knew such a thing was not beyond the Leaf. He had hoped the Hokage—by reputation—was not that cruel, but when it came to protecting his own people and ensuring peace for thousands, what was the disgraced, dangerous, and inconsequential Grass village?

Shikamaru scratched his head behind his topknot. "By all reports, the Grass Shinobi look up to you a great deal. Killing you, even by your leave, isn't going to satisfy anyone. I'm sorry, but an execution is out of the question. A martyr is the last thing we need."

Juo closed his eyes. Regrets swam before him, so numerous as to be uncountable.

"What the Grass needs is leadership," Shikamaru said. "Naruto wants to know if you are interested in that job."

Juo's eyes snapped open. At first, he thought Shikamaru was mocking him, but the Shinobi's expression was too calm. He just sat there, crouch, regarding Juo impassively.

"You can't be serious," Juo said at last.

"So you aren't interested?"

Juo's mouth went dry. He could not wrap his mind around it. "You aren't going to destroy the Grass?"

"Not if we can govern it instead."

"You mean to rule over us?"

"We mean to stabilize you," Shikamaru said. "I hope you can understand our position. We do not wish to subjugate the Grass Village, but neither can we ignore it, not in its current state. The

Grass is in shambles; its people are desperate and have no leadership."

"And you want me to lead? Me?" Normally, Juo was not one to waste words by asking the same thing twice, but he had to be sure. Shikamaru did not have a reputation for foolishness—quite the opposite, in fact. But how could this be a genuine offer? The Grass had gambled and lost. They had been conquered. Juo himself had been the one to break faith with the Leaf. He had kidnapped a Leaf Academy child, the daughter of a famed Shinobi and a very important client. His actions—if not on his orders—had brought the two villages to battle. "How can this be so?" he demanded. "I do not understand."

"Naruto is a special Hokage," Shikamaru said dryly. "You must have heard the stories. To get where he is today, Naruto had to find an answer an impossible question: How do you stop hatred? His solution was actually fairly simple: You stop hatred by treating Shinobi—all people—as human beings, individuals with dreams and fears, successes and failures, joys and pains. Naruto lives that solution. It doesn't matter whether the Shinobi are enemies or allies. It doesn't matter what they have done. No Shinobi feels that he is a tool, or trash, when Naruto looks at him, and since he became Hokage, the rest of us follow his example."

"Doesn't that lead to a weak rule?" Juo demanded.

"No," Shikamaru said. "Treating Shinobi as people doesn't mean Naruto doesn't hold them accountable. On the contrary, they are held more accountable. Naruto has high standards for Shinobi."

"But you aren't going to kill me?"

"We don't think killing you is necessary or helpful in this situation," Shikamaru said. "But if we had decided to kill you, you would be treated like a person, all the way to your grave. As it stands, we think holding you accountable for the choices you have made means

something different than death. That is why we are having this conversation."

"What about my companions?"

"We don't wish to kill them either."

"And my village?"

"When we look at the Grass, we see people who were poorly guided by corrupt leaders. We don't believe your people need punishment; not all of them anyway. What they need is to be shown a better way to live."

Juo didn't have words, but he began to understand Shikamaru's—no, the Hokage's-intention. He wasn't being let off. Both Juo and the Leaf wanted the Grass to have a future. The Hokage had a vision for what that future should be. That meant the Hokage had a purpose for Juo, and it would not be an easy thing.

"So," Shikamaru said, pausing for effect. "Are you interested?"

Juo tried to think. Surely there was someone better, someone he ought to recommend over himself, but no one came to mind. What he thought of instead was the youth, Chuunin like Kaia, full of fire and grief, and Genin like her sister Saiya, spirited but naïve. He thought of how little they knew of the world and how unfairly they had been used. He was not a man given to emotion, and didn't show it now, but he was momentarily overcome with the enormity of what was being asked of him.

"I don't know if I can do what you are describing," he said at last, deciding he must be honest. "I am a relic of an older world and understand this new world less than most. I am not a man accustomed to forgiving enemies or being forgiven by them, nor do I have experience treating any Shinobi, even myself, as human beings. That is *why* I am respected by the Grass. Shinobi like me are the reason we have failed to adapt."

Shikamaru nodded, as if this was exactly what he had expected to hear, but he did not get up and turn away. "Are you interested?" he asked, as if Juo had not said anything at all.

"I want life for the Grass," he answered. "Yes, I am interested, but I do not know the way."

"Well," Shikamaru said with a deep sigh, "Naruto believes that you can learn, and what Naruto believes in, I am willing to try. Think of it this way: If an old relic like you *can* learn, so can the rest of the Grass. I think, actually, that that is the core of the Hokage's plan."

Lucia stood by the widest window in the Hokage's office, letting sunlight bathe her face and neck as she stared out over the red tile rooftops of the Leaf Village. Behind her, Ino was arranging flowers-white lilies, yellow roses, and daisies-in a ceramic pot on a table where an envelope sat, stuffed with papers. Lucia always associated white lilies with funerals, which perhaps was appropriate, but Ino insisted that the flowers meant peace and sympathy. Lucia supposed that was appropriate too.

"Are you okay?" Ino asked her as she finished her work, tossing the remains of leaves and stems in a can under the Hokage's desk and tucking the sheers in her belt. She did not touch the papers. "I'd think you would be so angry."

Ino was referring to Gehard, who was scheduled to leave tomorrow. Lucia had requested to see him before he left and the Hokage had arranged it. The Shinobi, including Naruto himself, were fetching him now.

"I am not angry," Lucia said truthfully. "I am ready for all of this to end."

Ino gave her a sympathetic look. She had offered to be present when she heard that Lucia would be talking to Gehard. Lucia was not sure she needed the comfort, but she was not sure she didn't

need it either, and Ino had been a friend to Lucia in a way she had never had before.

"What do you think he'll say?" Ino asked.

"Whatever he thinks will do him the most benefit," Lucia said with a sigh. "I hear he is complacent enough as a prisoner."

"Oh yes," Ino said, rolling her eyes. "If by complacent you mean making demands to see you nearly every day and complaining about everything—his cell, his clothes, his food, *nothing* meets his expectation. He really seems to think we should care."

"I mean he has not made any serious trouble," Lucia said.

"No," Ino agreed. "I guess not. But how could he really? The weakest of the Genin could overpower him."

Lucia supposed that was true.

A knock came at the door.

Lucia turned to look. Naruto, looking every inch the Hokage in spite of his youth, walked into the room in full formal attire. Embroidered red flames blazed along the hem of his white cloak, clashing spectacularly with the bright orange jacket he wore underneath. He took off the Hokage hat as he entered and handed it to Ino.

Gehard came in behind him.

Her husband had certainly looked better. Gone was the dashing man who had once so brazenly displayed a loathsome mix of power, popularity and irresponsible behavior. In his place stood a frightened, dusty, travel-stained man in foreign, once-expensive-looking clothes that had seen better days. The pair of Jounin assigned to deliver him to the Higher Houses—Shino Aburame and Kiba Inuzuka—came in behind him, masked, hooded and silent as hangmen.

For his part, Gehard seemed to be doing a decent job of ignoring the terrifying escort. But when he saw Lucia, he swallowed visibly and his eyes darted away from her face.

Lucia, as always, was impeccably dressed. She had chosen her clothes carefully—a pair of spotless white silk pants and a matching halter top that shimmered faintly in the sunlight. She was also wearing expensive jewelry, something she had refrained from doing before in Konoha. A necklace of hand-wrought diamond-encrusted beads threaded on a glittering platinum chain hung around her neck. Diamonds hung from her ears in cascading drops all the way to her shoulders. Her hair was elaborately styled, as she might have worn it back home, but with gold tooth combs from these lands, set with gold-wrought birds and pearls.

She had the pleasure of seeing jealousy in Gehard's eyes. He hated her. Hated her and admired her. He was frightened of her too. None of that surprised or upset her. Without giving him more than a glance, she seated herself at the table where Ino had been arranging flowers. Ino moved to stand behind her. Gehard sat across from her, guards at either shoulder. Naruto stood between them as mediator.

"You look well," Gehard said bitingly, implying something, she supposed, about their differing circumstances.

She did not rise to that. "I have agreed to see you," she said, "because there is unfinished business between us. I would like to conduct that business now."

"Very good of you," he said acidly, "to see your husband."

"You don't want to remain here," she said. "You would not even if the choice was given to you."

"No," he said flatly. "And why you would choose to baffles me. To live here, in a squalid village full of criminals—I do not understand what has happened to you."

"You never understood me. Let's leave it at that. I am told that you have asked to see me every day since you were brought here. Why?"

"I am your husband," he said. "I demanded to speak to my wife. Why should that be questioned?"

"Speak to me about what?" she asked. "Now is your chance."

"Everything," Gehard said, snarling as he looked around the room. "All of this. You can't really mean to do what I have been hearing. You can't really mean to ally yourself with these—" His gaze twitched to the Shinobi surrounding him. He did not finish his sentence.

"I see," she said regretfully. "I thought you might have wanted to apologize,"

"Apologize?" he said. "To *you* ?"

"Yes," she said, "or at least to Rina, but no matter. I don't need it. What I need from you is your signature."

He fell silent, looking cagey.

She picked up the envelope from the table and withdrew a sheaf of documents. She set them in front of Gehard and placed a pen beside his hand. "All the documents have been drawn up."

He stared at them, unmoving.

"I would want my lawyer to—" he began.

"But you won't get that," she said. "There is nothing devious here. These papers, once signed, will be a legal contract relinquishing all rights you have over anything of mine. They will replace all previous papers, including our prenuptial agreement, rendering us fully and forever divorced."

He didn't respond.

"You can have the house," she said quietly. "If you want it. I certainly will not need it."

"I won't be able to afford it," he said, "as you well know. I will not be able to pay my debts, not if I sell every last scrap of furniture and the house too. You will make me a pauper, Lucia."

She said nothing. It was useless to argue that Gehard had made himself a pauper, playing fast and loose with money that was not his to burn. It was useless to argue that remaining married to her for some profit he thought himself afforded was insanity. It was useless even to say that being given the house meant he could sell it and live quite comfortably if less lavishly. He wouldn't see it that way.

"I won't sign," he said. "I don't want to divorce you. This is—" He looked around him, eyeing the Shinobi guards behind him particularly. "This is coercion."

"It's not coercion. It's defeat. You lost," Kiba interjected flatly. "You should be counting your blessings that you weren't gutted and left to —"

"It's all right," Lucia told the Shinobi guard calmly. "This was not unexpected." She leaned forward, regarding Gehard coolly. "He's correct, though. This is not a negotiation. You have nothing to barter with. There will be no legal battle, no settlement. The purpose of this is to be free of one another. Don't you want to be free of me?"

He looked sullen. He was probably thinking about his many mistresses and how he could possibly keep up the charade of not being able to commit to any of them when he no longer had a cold wife to use as his excuse for everything. Some of them had money even, but that might not do him much good.

"I want to be free," she told him. "I don't want to spend one more moment thinking about you."

His jaw tightened. A man like Gehard had little beyond pride to sustain him, and he was clinging to that, wounded though it was.

"I don't want you to spend any time thinking about me either," she said, just as quietly. "It is no part of my vengeance to make you miserable. My battle is with the Higher Houses. I just want you to be gone. I never want to hear your name again. Do you understand me?"

He was watching her closely, trying to guess her intent, handsome features serene. She didn't blink.

"How much will that cost?" she asked him. "What will satisfy you? I want you to name a price."

The question clearly startled the room. Ino gave an audible gasp. Naruto shifted and threw her a sharp glance. She ignored the Shinobi. They didn't understand her world. Her attention was on Gehard.

He weighed her noiselessly, but she could see the wheels in his head turning, trying to guess at a number that would be as high as she would pay without being so high as to be impudent enough for her to rescind the offer. She, of course, had already decided what that number would be. She had to pay him enough to get on with, enough to *embarrass* him, so that he would not want to come back with his hand held out, but not so high as to tempt him to suffer embarrassment a second time.

"You can't possibly *pay* him to divorce you," Ino objected, crossing her arms. "After all he put you through? After what he did to your children?"

"I meant what I said about wanting to be free," Lucia answered. "And I never will be if he feels I owe him something for his pains, however mistaken. How much will it take, Gehard? Be wise. You only get one chance. If I hear a whisper of you ever again, I will have recompense. Do you understand?"

Gehard nodded. If he showed up again, in any way, she would ruin him, utterly and forever. He knew she could do it. She had done it to others, people she arguably had less reason to despise. That she made an offer at all was generous. He knew that. He might hate her for it, but he also would not refuse, and if she had gambled correctly, he also wouldn't get in her way when she went after the Higher Houses. That was important.

"You're quite cold, you know," Gehard said. "You kidnap my children, force me to come after you—you knew I would have to come—You put me through hell, Lucia. I never wanted to be here. There was a better way to do all of this."

"How much?" Lucia repeated. She didn't have the energy to refute such nonsense.

Gehard uttered a number. The number made Kiba whistle.

"Outrageous," Ino said flatly. "You could feed and outfit the whole village off of that for a year!"

"Done," Lucia said. "That will account for the amount your father paid my mother to marry me. I will also pay your expenses home, with the luxury you are accustomed to along the way, so long as you go and do not come back. Not ever."

Gehard was quiet for a moment. "What about Rina?"

"You relinquish all rights over her," Lucia said. "Rina is not yours, not biologically and not in any other way. After what you did, you will never be allowed near her again. You certainly cannot contest that that is the best thing for her."

Gehard looked unhappy. "I know you don't believe it," he said, "but I care for Rina."

"I do believe it. She was your little doll," Lucia said. "She cares for you too. If, someday, she wishes to see you again, that is up to her.

But that day is a ways off. If she chooses such a thing, I want you to remember that she will not be the same girl she is now. If you ever meet again, Rina will be more dangerous than you can possibly imagine."

"You ruin everything you touch," Gehard said.

"Only you would think that a woman with power to protect herself is ruined," Lucia answered.

Gehard didn't answer.

"Sign the papers," she said.

She watched with an impassive expression as he signed. As the pen scratched against the paper, something that had been tightly wound inside her chest stared to release. The sensation was like a wind rising on a still day. It seemed to her that before that moment, all the days of her life had been windless.

Itachi leaned against the wall in the hallway, eyes closed, listening to the melody that drifted through the corridors. He had forgotten what music sounded like.

Rina had been playing the piano all morning, every morning, for days on end. She was creating something. She was writing a song that he had never heard before, and though it was not finished, the pieces he caught when he snuck into the hallway without her being aware stirred him close to tears.

It had a melancholy, haunting melody, poignantly phrased with a grand and sweeping chorus. Itachi felt himself pulled in by the sound of it. He sat in the corridor, listening, just outside the little storage room in the basement of the Hokage's administrative building where the piano had been set up.

After a few bars, Rina stopped playing. He heard the sound of scribbling and muttering. She was still composing. Then she began to play again, trying out the variation.

If she noticed him when he entered, she did not let him know it. Her eyes were closed, her fingers moving across the keys like ripples on water. He watched her play, her expression intense, sitting straight-backed in front of the piano. Nothing communicated emotion like music.

"Gehard is leaving," Itachi said when she closed her verse. "Do you want to say goodbye to him?"

Rina shook her head. She did not stop playing, launching again into that grand chorus that was like tears flowing in a larger, majestic waterfall.

"Are you sure?" Itachi asked her. "He was more of a father to you than he ever was to me. He was selfish and cruel and he almost got us all killed, but on some level, I think he meant well. You'll probably never see him again."

She stopped playing. The music cut off abruptly, mid-chorus. She paused, hands hovering over the keys.

Slowly, she nodded, her fingers curling. Even more slowly, she got up, sliding off the piano bench. Her features were scrunched and she moved stiffly, uncertainly. He understood. This was a hard thing to have to resolve all at once. In truth, it probably couldn't be resolved—not fully—maybe not ever. But they could at least say goodbye.

He walked with Rina to where Gehard was waiting just outside the building. His mother was there with Ino and Naruto and two Shinobi Jounin. Gehard looked up when he and Rina emerged from one of the side doors of the building. His expression was glum. He looked like he swallowed stones for breakfast.

Rina didn't say anything for several long moments, fingers twisting in front of her, but then she nodded slowly. She looked up and met his eyes. "They say you're going," she said. There was a long pause while they looked at each other. Then Rina dropped her eyes. "Goodbye," she mumbled, then she turned and vanished back inside the door they had just come out of.

Gehard looked after her, a pained expression on his face, and then turned to Itachi. "I barely recognize you anymore," he said. "You've changed."

"The eyes?" Itachi guessed. One eye was still stuck as a Sharingan, and always would be as far as he knew.

"More than the eyes."

Looking at this man, Itachi struggled to remember what he had been afraid of. Was it really less than a year ago that he had been thrown to the ground, his sister struck, his mother threatened, and he had felt helpless? It seemed like something that happened in a dream. Or to someone else.

"We won't see a lot of each other in the future," Itachi said.

"No," Gehard said.

Itachi wasn't sure how to read his stepfather's face. Was Gehard relieved? Insulted? Afraid?

On impulse, he stuck out his hand.

Gehard blinked in surprise. He hesitated, but then stepped forward to take it. They shook.

Gehard didn't say anything.

Their hands came apart. Itachi turned and left.

His mother watched the exchange without saying a word.

Itachi traced his steps back to where he had found Rina, thinking she might have gone back to play, but the corridor was silent now. No music came from the storage room. As he got closer, he heard another sound.

He approached quietly, looking in from the doorframe.

Rina was there, sitting on the bench, arms wrapped around her body.

She was crying over the keys.

"Rina," he whispered.

She choked on her tears and wiped her hand across her face.

"It's okay," he said. "You can cry. I just—I want you to know that you're not alone. You're never going to be alone. Mom and I are not going anywhere. I know I was busy a lot before, but I'm going to spend more time with you now."

She peeked at him, pulling her hands down partway to reveal her dark eyes, like twin pools of ink. "Itachi?" she said quietly. "Will you go with me to ask the Hokage something?"

"What?" he asked, puzzled.

"I want to perform something."

Itachi looked at his sister questioningly. "Perform something? When?"

"Tonight," Rina said, her pale round face as serious as winter. "For the whole village."

Itachi stared at her for a while, unsure how to respond. Gehard was being escorted out of the village. He had heard that Juo was leaving too. Perhaps tonight *was* a good time for something festive, if the information could be spread quickly enough.

He paused in his thoughts. Rina was still looking at him expectantly, dark eyes hopeful. What was he thinking? Of course the information could be delivered quickly. These were Shinobi.

"Let's ask the Hokage," he said.

Sasuke hadn't seen much of anyone since Konoha's return from the Grass. He had taken pains to make it so, keeping out of public gatherings and leaving his home before dawn most days to spend his time in the wilds around the village. Sometimes he spent the hours training. Other times he spent them staring.

Something inside him had changed. Was changing. It was something small, almost imperceptible, but it was close to his heart, and as it shifted, it was like the ground giving way beneath his feet. It was changing him from the inside out, as completely as he had been changed when he first came back to Konoha.

It frightened him.

"Brother," he whispered to the nothingness. Nothing answered.

There was no ghost. There never had been. There was only the leaves dancing in the trees, and a soft wind on his face. The gnarled roots of the trees dug into the soil, drinking deeply of the earth. The sun was warm. He was alone in the glen.

A crunch sounded…feet breaking leaves. Then a voice calling his name softly. A woman's voice. Sakura?

No.

He rose to see Lucia emerging from behind a tree. She saw him and looked momentarily startled, as if she had happened upon a stag unexpectedly. "Oh," she said.

"How did you find me?" he asked.

She grunted. "Not easily. I've been looking for over an hour," she said. "But Naruto said you spend your time out here and gave me some guidance."

Sasuke was silent. So Naruto was keeping an eye on him. Typical.

"What do you want?" he asked her.

"Two things," she said. "First, you should return to the village with me. Rina is going to be performing something, and she specifically asked for your attendance."

"Performing?" Sasuke asked. "What is she performing?"

"She's written a song," Lucia said. "Come and you will see. She would like for you to sit with us."

Sasuke nodded. He could do that. "And the other thing?"

She turned her head, dark hair spilling down her bare shoulder in a cascade of curls. She reached for a sack hung at her side and withdrew a canister and two round cups.

"I wanted to have a drink," Lucia said. She was dressed in white silks but seemed to pay her clothes no heed as she sat on a fallen log. She looked at him expectantly. "With you."

Sasuke wasn't sure what to do or say, so he did the conventional thing. He walked over to sit beside the woman who was pouring him a cup of what looked to be sake.

"What are we drinking to?" Sasuke asked.

"Does it matter?" Lucia asked. She tapped her cup against his in a kind of salute and downed the whole thing in a swallow. After a moment of silence, she spoke. "The end of an era," she said. "Or new beginnings perhaps. A chapter has been turned."

The thing inside Sasuke that had changed stirred at this suggestion. He downed his cup. Lucia refilled it, and her own. They drank again.

"I also wanted to talk to you," she said. "I think… I think there has been a lot of misunderstanding between us."

Sasuke didn't say anything, but he nodded.

"I wanted to tell you cleanly," she said. "I loved your brother, as much as it was possible to, given the circumstances."

Sasuke said nothing.

"I should have said so the moment I was sure, but I thought you would despise me for it," she said. "I thought he was a vicious murderer. And I thought it wasn't my place. There was a lot I didn't understand."

He looked at the ground. "There's still a lot that you don't understand," he said quietly. "It took me years to put the pieces together. I supposed you want to know the whole story."

She refilled his cup. The clink of the canister against the rim interrupted him.

"I do," she said, "but not today. Didn't I say we were celebrating?"

He looked up at her.

Her eyes shimmered with a feeling that was all too familiar to him. "The life I have been living for ten years is over suddenly and I'm a little raw yet. And anyway, I would prefer to be all together when you tell it."

"All together?" he asked, blinking.

"Me, you, and the children."

He shivered.

"Because we are a family," she said. "Whether you recognize it or not, that is the truth. You are their uncle. Regardless of what you think of me, that makes you family."

He regarded her in silence for several long moments. She sat on the log beside him, dressed all in white silk, her dark hair bouncing around her shoulders in curls. The attitude he had sensed from her before, aloof and cold, was less present now than it had ever been. She was like a statue of ice that had been melted into warm rainwater.

When he spoke, his voice was somber. "I misunderstood you too," he said. "Willfully at times. I thought you were a user. My brother was all used up, and those that did the using are dead, so I wanted to despise you. But I was wrong. I think you were fair to him, and…" he paused. "I think my brother loved you."

Lucia's head snapped up.

Sasuke met her eyes. "If he had the capacity, if it was possible for him, then I'm sure he loved you."

Lucia did not reply, but she didn't need to. Sasuke's words had a visible effect. Her eyes darkened, becoming like still pools glistening with reflected light.

"He knew about the children," Sasuke said quietly. "He meant for you to have them. He must have loved you."

"I should have saved him," she whispered.

"No one could have saved him."

"How do you know? I could have taken him away, beyond the reach of your wars, where there are medicines, luxuries. It was in my power. With my resources, I could have-"

"He wouldn't have accepted that. There was nothing you could do. He loved me too. He loved our parents. It didn't change anything."

She was quiet. "I don't like this feeling," she said at length.

"I don't like it either, but I've lived with it for so long now, I hardly notice anymore. You'll come to accept that there was nothing you could have done, that his choices were his and not yours, and that the memories worth remembering are the ones you want to remember."

It was odd. Sasuke was speaking to Lucia, but he wasn't really speaking to her. It was almost like he was talking to himself, and more strangely, *advocating* for himself, in trying to help her. The feeling was peculiar. And it made him feel better than he had felt in a long time.

"Itachi didn't want to be saved," he continued. "What he did to the clan, to himself, to me-He knew what would happen. He was ordered to do it, but he also chose to do it. He really believed it was for the best. After that, he didn't want anything from anyone."

Lucia turned her head to the side. Her voice had the effect of cool water poured over a fevered head. "He wanted peace."

"For others, yes."

"And I think he wanted us both to live," Lucia said. She drank from her cup and then stared into it. "To live. Not just survive."

Sasuke pondered her words for a few moments. He felt odd. Maybe it was the sake beginning to affect his senses, but he felt as if he was just seeing things clearly in a way he hadn't for a long time.

He wanted me to live.

"I can drink to that," he said quietly.

She poured him another cup.

"I don't think I've ever seen this much stuff," Haro told Itachi.

Itachi just nodded. Most everyone had heard about the arrival of his Aunt Cecile and the wagons full of his family's things. Now all of those things were in his house—piles and piles of it. His aunt, her husband, and their servants were renting a house on another street, as the house could not contain them. Itachi's room was full of boxes. There little rental house was bursting with belongings far too numerous and ornate for its rustic walls.

"Are you going to sell it?" Amaya asked, peering with interest at Itachi's guitar.

"Some of it," Itachi answered. "I don't need most of this, but mom wants to keep some of the heirlooms that were passed down in her family. We're going to move."

"Where?" Ayame asked.

"The edge of the village," Itachi said. "We're going to build a place. She hasn't decided yet exactly, but it will be somewhere quiet, away from the crowds and overlooking the woods, near Sasuke's place."

"Build a house?" Haro mumbled. "Sounds expensive."

Itachi flushed. Since the mission, he had quite suddenly and very famously become the richest kid in the village. He wasn't sure he liked it. He was not ashamed of it, but he had grown accustomed to having to fight for recognition amongst his peers and was worried that things would change. But there was no help for it. His mother wasn't going to be able to pretend to be destitute anymore. His only saving grace was that the people of Konoha did not seem able to conceive of exactly how wealthy his family was. They knew what rich families were able to afford in their village and the surrounding areas and just assumed he was like them. The notion that all of Konoha could fit in his mother's pocket was incomprehensible.

I'll have to manage it someday , he thought. Was it better to hope she spent most of the family's wealth on her vendetta against the Higher Houses? He wasn't sure.

Fortunately, his mother was not bent only on vengeance. Building a new house was her smallest project. She'd been spending a lot of time with the Hokage, talking through plans for the expansion of the village and restructuring of Shinobi offerings and training. He'd also heard that she'd donated a considerable sum to a bewildered, but delighted petitioning group from outside the village who has passed through seeking support from the Hokage to improve road conditions and construct way houses for weary travelers. He suspected she'd done that in honor of his father.

Haro was touching his guitar. "I heard your sister's got a…" Haro frowned. "Some kind of instrument? I saw a group of Shinobi moving it into the arena. They're erecting a platform too—the one they use during the Chunin exams."

"A piano," Itachi said. "It wouldn't fit in the house on top of everything else, so we had put it in one of the storage rooms in the administration building. I went to ask the Hokage about allowing Rina to perform and he sent some guys to move it into the arena. Rina has been there all day preparing," Itachi said.

"What is she playing for this concert?" Amaya said. "Everyone's been talking about it all day. I don't think Konoha has ever had a concert."

"I've only heard pieces of it," Itachi said. "I'm not really sure."

"Is she going to be okay performing in front of everyone?" Amaya asked. "I would think that would be scary for her."

"It's hard to say with Rina," Itachi said. "She has performed in front of people before and has always done well. She actually struggles more face to face than in front of a large crowd."

"Huh," Haro said. "I suppose you'll be sitting in the front row with your mom?"

Itachi nodded, puzzled by the question. "Probably."

Haro turned to Amaya. "Do you want to go and sit with me then?" he asked her.

Amaya blinked. There was a short pause during which Haro's face was so perfectly controlled that it might as well have been carved from marble.

"Sure," Amaya said finally. "I mean yes."

Haro just nodded, not quite looking her in the eye, trying to look cool.

"Well, I should go," Amaya stammered. "I don't want to be late for dinner and I need to pick up some things from the market. I—I'll see you two later."

She scampered off, beating a straight path to the market.

Itachi raised an eyebrow at Haro. "What is that about?" he asked.

"Her father's been having dinner with her every night since the mission," Haro said. "She seems happy about it."

"That's great, but not what I meant."

Haro flushed slightly. "Oh. Well, you know," he said ruefully, rubbing the back of neck and avoiding Itachi's eyes. "We're just spending time together, but it's good." He seemed happy. "So I'll see you at the concert then?"

Itachi smiled. "See you are the concert."

When Itachi had asked his question, Naruto had merely grinned and clapped his hands. "We'll do it tonight!" he exclaimed. Naruto clones

had been dispersed throughout the village to inform them of a special event, and word of mouth covered anyone who hadn't heard directly from the Hokage.

Now, with dusk settling over the village, Shinobi and Konoha citizens alike thronged the streets leading toward the arena. The seats were already beginning to fill.

He sat with his mother in approximately the same seating they had when they had watched Naruto battle Sasuke in this same arena. Amaya and Haro sat together on Itachi's right with Amaya's father; Haro's family was elsewhere. Itachi's mother sat on his left. The Hokage sat in the row in front of them with Hinata, Ino, Chouji, and Sakura.

A Naruto clone was also down in the arena, talking to some workers who were milling about the platform. It was little more than a square box erected in the middle of the arena upon which the piano sat alone. Sasuke had not shown up yet, but there was a seat for him beside Itachi's mother.

It was an odd thing for Itachi. He had fought Yukio's team in this arena, and he had seen Naruto fight an exhibition match against Saskue here when he first arrived in the village. He knew the Chunin exams took place here also. He was not sure that the arena had ever been used for anything other than fighting.

The piano was certainly a strange sight for the villagers and was eliciting a lot of comments and speculation. The crowd was buzzing about it. They didn't have pianos here. Most of the music produced in this area of the world came from flutes and percussion and some simple string instruments, and there wasn't much of that in Konoha.

"Where's Rina?" Ino asked, turning her head to look at his mother. "I don't see her." Her baby was on her lap, fast asleep.

"She's down there," Lucia murmured. "In the alcoves."

"Aren't you worried about her down there by herself?"

"No," Lucia said. "Rina has performed in front of crowds before. She has grown up a little recently and she has prepared for this. I expect her to do very well."

Ino turned to Sakura. "How about you?" she asked. "Are you doing all right? How are you feeling? Still no morning sickness?"

Sakura shook her head. "None, but I'm not concerned," she said. "It's different for everyone."

"Lucky," Ino muttered. "I was nauseous with this one." She hugged her infant close.

Sakura turned to smile at her, but her smile looked a little sad.

"What about—?" Ino began.

Sakura interrupted her with a flat look. "If you mean Sasuke, it's okay," she said. "I can hardly expect to avoid him as long as I remain in the village. If I was worried about it, I wouldn't have sat here."

"So you are still thinking of leaving?" Ino asked. She looked crestfallen.

"I think it's the only way," Sakura said. "I just need to move forward."

Some time passed in awkward silence as everyone stared at their hands.

Itachi didn't understand it. He knew his uncle loved Sakura. Everyone knew it. And she was pregnant with his child and obviously deeply in love with him. Why couldn't they work it out? He knew it had to do with his uncle's lost family, the ones that had perished at Itachi Uchiha's hands, and the loss of Itachi Uchiha himself. Sasuke couldn't seem to let go of those feelings and they were poisoning his ability to be with Sakura. It seemed awfully unfair—the whole situation.

"Is he even going to show up?" Ino muttered suddenly, looking around the arena with a frown on her face.

Itachi had stopped looking for his uncle. Being anxious about Sasuke didn't seem worth the effort. Sasuke would come when he wanted and sit where he wanted. His mother and Sakura didn't seem concerned about it either.

More time passed. The crowd was starting to get restless. Itachi didn't know what the Hokage was waiting for. It wasn't like there was much to prepare with the piano. It had been transported and tuned hours ago. Rina was ready, he was sure. He could imagine her standing in the darkness in the wings, taking deep breaths and staring at the piano on the platform with shining eyes.

Abruptly, Sasuke was there.

Itachi hadn't seen him coming or heard him arrive. One moment the seat beside Itachi's mother was empty and in the next Sasuke was easing into it. He sat rigidly, eyes staring straight ahead. Itachi's mother didn't speak to him or give him any significant looks, but they sat together peacefully, which said everything that needed to be said.

Sakura turned her head once to look at Sasuke. There was a crease between her brow, but she did not frown or say anything either. Sasuke felt her eyes and looked at her too. There was something in his expression, tender and aching, that made Itachi's breath catch. He seemed like he wanted to speak to Sakura, but he didn't. He just sat there, looking at her with that agonizing expression, until their whole box felt like being inside a tension bubble.

The tension eased when Naruto's clone bounded up to the platform and waved his arms. The crowd buzzed louder at first and then quieted.

"We have a special treat tonight," the Hokage said, his voice booming without the need of a microphone. "Our very own Rina

would like to perform something on her instrument as a thank you to the village." He paused, looking into the alcove. There was a moment of silence and then Naruto smiled warmly. "Okay, she's ready. Everyone, please welcome Rina." He gestured, extending his arm to the steps leading up to the platform, and then vanished in a puff of smoke.

There was applause. Rina appeared as they clapped. She looked so small from Itachi's vantage point, all alone in the vastness of the arena. She was wearing a purple dress that had come with the wagons. It had lilac flowers embroidered along the hem and crawling up the sleeves. Itachi thought he had seen that dress on Rina maybe once before, back home, and knew it had been her favorite at the time—the type of thing she had been loath to leave behind when they fled to come here. And now she had to back. She had everything back. More.

Show them, Rina, he thought. *Show them what they saved.*

The applause died down. In silence, Rina took the stage.

Her small figure climbed the steps to the wooden platform. She made her way across the floor to the center of the stage. She did not walk immediately to the grand piano. Instead, she walked to the front and looked out over the crowd.

Her eyes scanned the sea of people, all staring down at her from on high. Itachi wondered what that must be like for her, looking straight at the rows and rows of humanity. There was no fear or nervousness visible in the way Rina held herself. Itachi had seen her perform many times. Afterward, she would say she felt a little nervous, but that wouldn't stop her. It was intimate conversation with people she did not know that she approached with caution, always watching before speaking, sometimes for long spans of time.

"Thank you," she said.

Her small voice carried across the stadium, clear and piping as a bird's. She did not elaborate. She did not mention that she had been kidnapped. She did not mention that Konoha had saved her life, and her mother's, and her friends. But somehow her silence conveyed all of that. Her thank you hung in the air like a struck bell. The longer she was quiet, the deeper her words seemed. The watching crowd was utterly silent in response, absorbing it like a sponge.

"I have written a song," she continued, and lowered her eyes. "It is about my family."

Itachi blinked in surprise and sat up straighter. He knew she had composed something, but…

"It is about my mother," Rina continued, "my brother, Itachi, and my uncle Sasuke." She paused briefly. "And his brother."

Itachi looked at his mother. Her eyes had widened.

Sasuke looked even more struck. He sat with his back straight as an arrow—unnaturally straight—his eyes drinking up all the light. He looked like he might burst into movement any moment, tense as a coiled spring, but he did not move.

Rina said nothing more. She walked away from the audience, toward the piano. The silence that followed her was almost palpable, pregnant with tension. Murmurs moved through the crowd in quiet ripples. Itachi saw Sasuke's fingers clench against his thighs.

Either Rina didn't notice the tension or she did not care. She walked to the piano. She sat down lightly, settling herself on the bench like a feather, the lavender skirts of her dress spilling out around her like the petals of a flower. There was no music sheet. Whatever she was about to play was something she had memorized.

There was an elongated moment of silence while Rina sat on the bench, back straight, staring at the ivory white keys in front of her.

Then she began to play.

Itachi had heard Rina play before, but most of Konoha had not. Most of them had never heard a piano before, or any instrument with such breadth of expression. Rina's small fingers danced across the keys and music poured forth, following her moving hands in a cadence of lifts and drops, the notes ringing clear and the pauses in between pregnant with portent. Itachi couldn't say what the song sounded like, only that it was saturated deeply in emotion, smooth and violent at the same time, with a melody haunting but beautiful. It was a sad song, a strong song, a song of endurance, of temperance, of hidden secrets and kindness and bitter truths.

Of course it was.

It was about the family. The emotions that came upon him in listening to it—from the first few measures—was as pure and stark as daylight. Music, he realized, especially music like this, was a language—a language without words, a language that spoke straight from one heart to another, in such a way that the meaning could not be misunderstood.

Rina had found a way to voice every quiet whisper in her heart—to say all that she felt and all that she observed of others' feelings—to say it sharp and true, without shuffling, without avoiding eye contact, without regret or remorse or dissembling. It poured forth like a waterfall.

The song had several melodies, each played distinctly at first, and then interwoven. Itachi heard himself in one of them—a steady, clean melody that recurred again and again, predictable and infallible—always there. He heard what he felt must be his mother's melody—certain, but quiet, with undercurrents of harmonizing sadness running through every measure. When that melody wound into his, or Rina's, the only word he had to describe the sound was "devotion."

And then the song shifted, entering a second movement. Itachi didn't know what Konoha knew about composing music, but he knew this movement to be about them, or about their coming here. And then Rina started playing Sasuke's melody.

He had expected something cold, dark, stormy, or even harsh, reflecting the way Sasuke had treated them upon meeting. But it wasn't like that. Sasuke's movement was like the deep ache of an old pain. It was sad. It was strong. And it was isolated. It reminded him of a river at night, dark water softly surging, running away and away but never getting anywhere.

Itachi snuck at peek at Sasuke as he listened. His uncle sat on the other side of his mother. He sat stiffly, every muscle straining, eyes intent on the little girl playing on the stage. The expression on his face—deeply and uncharacteristically expressive, all the lines of it etched with sadness-was enough to make Itachi look hastily away.

The music changed again.

It was his father's theme. He knew it instantly. It had some in common with his own. It harmonized with his mother's. It…

Sasuke got up.

Itachi turned to gape as his uncle left his seat and strode away up the aisle. His mother put a hand on Itachi's wrist to stop him from speaking. She had not turned her head. She did nothing to acknowledge or draw attention to Sasuke's leaving.

The song went on.

Itachi listened, slowly relaxing again into the music. Eventually, Rina the song came to an end. The ending was neither climactic nor abrupt. There was a cadence that seemed to suggest an end and a continuance at the same time. The last note rung out, vibrating through the air. It was followed by silence. Rina lowered her hands, pulling them off the keys, and stood.

Thunderous applause.

His sister looked startled, like a fawn caught on its feet in the forest. After a moment of staring, she curtsied, bobbing down instinctively as she had been taught all her life, her face bright and clear and stained with pink.

She straightened and ran off stage.

Sasuke did not leave the arena.

He ran up the aisles, between the rows of benches, ignoring the startled looks of the ninja listening to the song, their faces a blur.

He made it to the top of the arena, behind the seats, and stepped into the shadows of the columns that supported the overall structure of the arena. There was no one back there. There was nothing but darkness.

He sank to his knees, the song still ringing across the arena, penetrating his ears, his skin, his mind, his heart.

And cried.

The stadium was emptying. Itachi had spent the last twenty minutes standing beside his sister, watching Rina be congratulated and peppered with awed, respectful questions by grown Shinobi with knife scars on their faces.

She had stammered herself breathless and eventually stopped talking, only able to respond with shy nods and smiles. Her admirers eventually seemed to realize she was overwhelmed. They took their leave pleasantly.

"You did wonderful, Rina," Itachi's mother murmured.

His sister's face glowed like the moon. She pressed her face into Itachi's shoulder and let out a happy sound somewhere between a laugh and a mew.

"You really were," Itachi told her.

They were some of the last people to leave the stadium. Rina walked beside Itachi, quiet and happy.

As they passed through the main exit tunnel, a shape burst out of the shadows. Itachi stopped in surprise, recognizing the shape as Yukio.

"That was incredible!" Yukio said. He didn't address Itachi. He fell in step beside Rina. She looked startled, twisting first toward Itachi and then back to Yukio. "There was this part," Yukio said, "where the music—". Yukio carried on, fumbling in his descriptions, not knowing the terminology. Rina's cheeks were flushed pink and she stared at Yukio adoringly.

I don't know if I like that , Itachi thought.

He looked to his mother. She was eyeing Yukio with careful speculation, but her expression betrayed no sentiment.

"I'm organizing a game tomorrow," Yukio was saying to Rina. "Do you know how to play Split?"

Rina shook her head.

"It's easy," he said. "It's the Genin mostly, but some Academy students as well and we could use a few more people. I thought you and your brother could round out our team."

Rina turned to Itachi, her eyes shining.

"Um," Itachi said. "Sure."

Yukio walked with them all the way home. By the time they reached the front porch, Rina still hadn't spoken a word. She followed their

mother to the front door, tailing her like a duck, but where Lucia went inside immediately, Rina hesitated, looking back at Yukio and Itachi. Night had come on, to the point where Yukio was little more than a silhouette framed by a sky smattered with stars.

Biting her lip, Rina went inside. Yukio stepped forward as if to follow her. Itachi grabbed his sleeve. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you cozying up to my sister?" he asked. "You never cared two ticks about her before."

"I saved her life," Yukio said, turning his face away.

Itachi blinked. That was true, but...

"It's been hard for her to make friends, right?"

"What does that have to do with—"

"Because she's a little weird?"

Itachi gripped Yukio's arm. Yukio was so…. But no. Yukio was blunt and tactless. But he was not wrong.

"It's going to continue to be hard for her," Yukio urged. "Being a musical genius will just make it worse. But if I'm friends with her, everyone I know will like her, and I know everyone."

Avoiding Itachi's incredulous expression, Yukio stooped to pick up a smooth stone. He tossed it into a potted plant sitting on a doorstep.

Itachi was flummoxed. Yukio seemed so *earnest* , even a little nervous, as if worried Itachi would disagree. "Well, just remember she's my sister," Itachi muttered. "Be nice to her."

"I just said I'd be her friend," Yukio said. "I'm always nice to my friends. And I do like her, genuinely, if you are concerned about that.

Really. It's kind of hard to stop noticing interesting things about her when you to know her a little, you know?"

Itachi had just been reconsidering, thinking that Yukio's acquaintance might be good for Rina, when Yukio had to go say a thing like *that* . Something about it bothered him. He didn't like the idea of Yukio liking Rina too much.

I'm going to have to be friends with Yukio , he realized.

There was no way around it that he could see. And not just amiable. Friends. The thought bothered him naturally. He was less irritated by Yukio after the mission, but he did not expect a 180 degree change in Yukio's character. He had hoped to set grudges aside but hadn't anticipated becoming particularly close. Yukio was still the same, still aggressive and brash, still thoughtless and impulsive.

The thought of Yukio becoming close with Rina alarmed him. Yukio would influence Rina. He wouldn't be able to help it. They were so different. He was everything she wasn't, everything most kids *wanted* to be. And he had saved her life. Best not to forget that.

He couldn't ask Rina to stay away from Yukio and couldn't expect her to obey him even if he did. He would have to just keep an eye on it. Being friends with Yukio was the only reasonable course of action. He needed Yukio to respect him. Fear him a little even…

I can't quit training, he realized.

He hadn't wanted to, but he had taken some comfort in the thought that it was less important now that he was openly his mother's heir. He could have done more accounting, less shuriken training. But he couldn't slack off now. He had to get ahead of Yukio. He would always have to be ahead, just in case, for Rina's sake. Yukio being Yukio would make that a challenge. Was it even possible?

I have the Sharingan , he thought. *Even with Yukio's years of experience, even with his crazy drive to outstrip everybody around*

him, I should still…

Yukio clapped him on the back, startling Itachi out of his thoughts.

"Tomorrow, okay?" he said. "I'll get the kids going and then swing by to pick up you and Rina." He flashed a grin at Itachi. "Maybe afterward we'll fight?"

Itachi just stared at him.

But Yukio merely waved and darted off, leaving Itachi standing on the front porch, staring after him in perplexity. He thought about how different things were now to when he had arrived here.

I think I'll try out for Chunin this year , he thought.

Smiling, he turned and went back inside the house he shared with his mother and sister.

The day after the concert was sunny and bright. The gardens on the outskirts of Konoha were just beginning to bloom. Tiny light green buds poked out among the leaves of the perennials. There weren't many flowers yet, but there would be soon.

Sakura didn't know what she was doing there. She had wanted to be alone, but she did not want to be indoors. She didn't want to work. And she didn't want to see anybody. The very last place she wanted to be was the hospital.

It was going to be hard to leave it all behind, even for a short while. Her work was here. Her friends. Her life.

She touched her abdomen, fingers light against her clothing. She still wasn't showing. Her body seemed to *like* being flat, but it wouldn't be long.

I can't stay , she thought resolutely. *I will love Sasuke forever, whether I want to or not. If I stay-*

There was no sound, but she felt the approach. And she knew who it was.

She turned.

Sasuke stood there as if her thoughts had summoned him. He was so tall and broad shouldered—it always surprised her a little, as if part of her could not forget the way he was when they were kids on Team 7 together.

The expression on his face was different. She was used to cold eyes and unknowable thoughts. But this was a long face, etched deep with emotion, with eyes that stared at her as if she were the only thing in the world, as if the garden around her were some hazy dream.

"What's wrong?" she asked him.

"Ask me," he said. "Ask me right now."

"Ask you what? I don't understand."

"Ask me how I feel about my brother, about how I feel about you. Ask me."

She just stared at him.

He started speaking without her asking anything. "I'm sad," he told her, "I've been so sad and so lost. But it's not because my brother is dead. It's because I was forgetting him."

"Forgetting him?" she whispered, bewildered.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've used you. Even when I didn't mean to, when I didn't even know I was doing it, I used you. I am sorry."

"Sasuke, we've been through all of this," she said quietly. "Many times. I know how hard things are for you. I know I've been too accommodating. We both know each other's weaknesses. We've both exploited the other at times. I just want—"

"I've pushed myself into darkness," he said. "These past few months—years maybe, I'm not sure. I've been doing it on purpose. I've been pushing you away because I thought—I thought that was the only way to hold onto him. I wanted to keep things the same. I didn't want to lose anything. I was afraid of moving forward because it meant moving on."

She didn't answer. She couldn't answer. She felt the urge to cry and forced it back. It was true. Everything he was saying.

"Sakura," he said. "I'm trying to say that I know how to love you. In order to have a future with you, I have to accept that I have *already* moved on. It has already happed. I just had to accept that I will—that I am already forgetting my brother."

Her eyes widened. "But I'm not asking—"

"It's not something you should feel guilty about," he said. "It doesn't have anything to do with you. That's the point. The truth is… the truth is that I have been happy. I've been happy here in Konoha, with you, for many years. I didn't think I could be. I didn't notice that I was. What I noticed was that I was forgetting Itachi, and that made me push you away."

"Sasuke, I don't understand what you are saying. You want to forget your brother now?"

"I'll never truly forget him," Sasuke said. "I'll never forget what he meant to me. That's impossible. But I have forgotten a lot of other things, small things, some big things, things that I never thought I would. Do you know it's getting hard for me to remember his face? Lately, when I think of him, I see the boy instead."

"The boy? Your nephew?"

"Yes," Sasuke said. "And when I hear his name, I think of him first."

"Itachi," Sasuke whispered, as if testing him.

"My nephew. It's not exactly like I have really forgotten. It's hard to explain. The feelings are still there, but the memories are hazy. I don't recall everything with the clarity that I used to."

"And that saddens you," Sakura murmured, looking away. "I understand. What does it mean?"

"I feel like I'm the verge of something," Sasuke said to her. "I wanted to see you, in order to confirm the feeling." His tone of voice was harsh, but not with her. There was a thickness to it, as if the words were pushing through some kind of barrier and coming out with more force than intended. "It means that you don't have to go to Sand—not if it's to escape me. I want you to stay. I want you to be with me."

"We've been through this, Sasuke," she began.

He interrupted her. "I don't mean it to be like before," he said quickly, interrupting her appeal. "I want to be a family. You won't be second. You won't come after Itachi. Not anymore. That's over."

She stared at him.

It was what she had wanted him to say, what she had imagined him saying to her, almost word for word. Had he really said it? It felt like a dream, a hallucination. She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, he was still standing there, his brow knit, watching her.

She shook her head, feeling as if there were cobwebs in her ears. "You're just saying what I want to hear, to prevent me from going. I don't want you to forget your brother to appease me. I don't want you to resent me. I can't live like that. This child—"

"I don't know what I can say that will convince you," he said, "maybe nothing, but I'm willing to spend the next eight months proving it if you let me, and the next eighty years after that."

"Optimistic," she muttered in reference to the lifeline, and then realized how significant that was. "Wait. What?"

His dark eyes stared into her face, like twin pools of deep, even black. The guardedness she was used to seeing in those eyes was absent. They were not open eyes, not innocent like young Itachi's, but they weren't cloaked either. Her breath caught.

"Something must have happened," she said. "Something changed, or…something is different. It isn't me. Nothing has changed with me, with us. What-?"

"It was that woman," he said. "Coming here like she did, stirring up all my anger, all my bitterness, forcing me to confront things I wanted to leave buried. And those children—I never thought I would have a family. I didn't want one again; I didn't know if I could take it. But I do. I am. It wasn't my choice, but they are here. I don't know if my brother did it on purpose. But whatever the reason, it is what it is. Nothing has changed, except that I have realized I…" He paused, emotion creeping into his voice. "I don't want them to go. And I don't want you to go. I don't want to live in the past anymore. I want to live together, with you, with everyone."

Sakura trembled.

"And I want to meet him," Sasuke said quietly. He avoided her eyes, his voice thick now. "Our baby. I want to say all other the things my father never said to me. And you too. You—you are precious to me, Sakura. I know that doesn't surprise you. It shouldn't anyway. But I lost sight of it. I lost it, but I don't want to lose you. I promise you. I'll be worthy of that feeling."

There was silence between them, stretching like a sigh. Sakura could hear the sound of the creek, the buzzing of flies, the chirping of

crickets. Sunlight blazed down from a bright blue sky, but it had rained in the morning and the air around her still smelled damp and rich with life. She felt herself sway, the blades of the grass itching her ankles.

"Say something," Sasuke whispered. There were stress lines around his eyes. H

Say something? She couldn't think.

"I…" she stopped. Her fist clenched, tightening into balls. "I'm afraid that you will take it back. That my happiness—"

He came closer and she trembled with every footfall. His arms came around her. She was visibly shaking. He wrapped her in a close, but gentle embrace. As she rattled against him, he whispered in her ear. "I'm not going to take it back."

She hated that she was shaking. She wanted to be composed. She wanted to be calm, regal, but she couldn't stop it. It wasn't fear. It wasn't excitement. Her body trembled with emotion so deep she couldn't identify it.

"I think it's going to be a girl," she blurted.

He smoothed her hair. She felt the back of his fingers against her cheek, trailing to her chin. He tilted her face up to look at him, and then leaned in to kiss her. As he pulled back, he smiled.

"What do you want to name her?"

Epilogue

Sasuke stood behind the glass, out in the waiting room, watching the medical staff mill around on the other side. He wasn't sure how he felt. He knew he should feel excited, but that was difficult when there was so much fear crowding out everything else. It was like the last

gulp of air before a sudden drop. But there was nothing he could do about it.

Just don't show it , he thought.

There were comfortable chairs lining the far wall, but he couldn't sit down. He couldn't do anything. He took measured strides back and forth across the tiled floor. They were long, purposeful strides, but they lacked actual purpose. He couldn't stop. If he stopped, he would start shaking.

Naruto came in a few minutes later. "Ready, daddy?" he asked.

Sasuke felt his chest constrict. "No," he said truthfully.

"Any word yet?"

Sasuke shook his head.

Sakura was insistent that Sasuke *not* be in the delivery room with her.

"Hey," Naruto said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Take a breath. Everything's going to be fine."

"I'm going to go mad," he said.

"You're going to be fine," Naruto told him. "Really. Sakura is going to deliver the most beautiful baby you've ever seen."

Ino opened the door.

Sasuke felt a wash of heat roll through him. "Is she-?"

"Not yet," Ino said to him. "I was told Naruto was in here."

Naruto's face brightened.

"Good," she said. "Sakura wanted to know if you had come." She smiled at Sasuke. "She's worried about you."

She's worried about *me* ? Sasuke thought wonderingly. "How is she?"

"She's fine," Ino said. "Nothing to do but wait. Baby comes when baby wants to come."

Sasuke's knees felt rubbery. He'd fought battles that were less exhausting than this, and he wasn't even the one doing the work.

Ino left them and Sasuke returned to pacing.

"Is Lucia coming?" Naruto asked curiously.

Sasuke nodded absently. "After," he said. "The kids too."

Naruto smiled at him.

Sasuke's stomach twisted into knots.

They waited.

Minutes blurred into hours. Sasuke paced, checked the time, paced again, sat down, walked, and paced again. There was nothing to do. Naruto came in and out of the room. Hinata came and she and Naruto talked quietly for awhile together. Others came, usually with news or questions for the Hokage. It broke up the time a little, and gave him something to listen to, but nothing could distract him for very long.

At some point, he had sat down on the bench, though he didn't remember doing so. Naruto was beside him, hands on knees. The door opened.

Ino stood there again, blue eyes twinkling, blond hair wrapped in a tight bun around the base of her neck.

"Mama's ready for you," she said.

Sasuke bolted upright. He felt the hard tiles of the hospital floor beneath his feet, grounding him, but the rest of the world was a hazy blur as he followed Ino. Naruto trailed him. They walked past white walls and closed doors. They passed a room full of babies.

He paused at the window. On the other side of the glass, he could see two babies, not his own, sleeping. They had been born recently, both boys, one bald as the other with a flop of dark hair. He stared at them, trying to make sense of who they were, of what he was about to see with his own baby.

Ino had paused with him. She saw his expression and gave him a light pat on the arm, and then continued walking. He followed. His hands were trembling.

Warmth emanated from the door to Sakura's room. There was a window beside the hospital bed that looked out on a tree, the leaves soaked from the recent rain. It had been stormy the past couple of days. The dirt streets of Konoha were muddy and covered in puddles.

Sakura lay on the bed, a thin white sheet pulled up to her chin. Her hair was sweaty, matted to the pillow behind her head. She looked tired, but her chakra control was phenomenal. Even as he watched, the color was noticeably returning to her face. Light came into her eyes as she turned her head to look at him. She smiled a tired, but exhilarated smile.

"Where…?" he asked, looking around. She couldn't have just had the baby. She looked too clean. Too perfect.

Then he spotted it.

There was a raised bassinet next to Sakura, a little rectangular box with a soft mattress and hood to block out light. He approached it cautiously.

Inside, laying with eyes closed, was a tiny person wrapped in a pink blanket.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Sakura said.

Sasuke didn't say anything. He just nodded. At the moment he leaned over the crib, she opened her eyes.

Those eyes were the most beautiful he had ever seen, like dark opals. They were blue, the color of midnight, and full of wondering, but he suspected they would darken into black Uchiha eyes. He was instantly smitten by them, as thoroughly as he had ever been by anything. He reached into the bassinet to pick her up.

Sakura struggled into a sitting position.

"It's okay," Sasuke said quickly to her in a soft voice. "I've got her." She was a light load in his arms, but he eased himself on the edge of the mattress beside Sakura, the bundle-wrapped baby held softly but securely.

"I love you," he told the baby. He had never been so sure of anything. "And I love you," he said to his wife.

She smiled at him, eyes glistening.

"So?" Naruto asked from the doorway. He was leaning through the opening, hands on the frame. "Not afraid?"

"No," Sasuke said. "I mean, yes, but not in the way I thought."

He bent his head close, until his nose was almost touching his daughter's face and listened to her breathing. She was perfect.

Sakura leaned back against the pillows, relaxing. She still looked tired, but content too.

He heard voices outside the hospital room. Naruto stepped aside and Sasuke turned to see the rest of his family coming in.

Itachi's eye had mended over the months. It looked normal now, with just the faintest hint of a scar from the surgery. He said he could see perfectly out of it with the Sharingan activated, and when it wasn't activated, he could see better than he had, enough to get around. The Sharingan was activated now, three tomoe circling around the pupil. He had gotten the third one recently, after a tied match with Yukio in the arena that had ended with the two of them panting on their backs and grinning like idiots.

Rina, his niece, had grown a few inches. She was still a child, but he was starting to see a hint of the woman she would grow into. She would be a beauty, as regal as her mother, soft as a flower, but deadly too. She had passed her Genin tests and was a marvel in the village. Though she didn't have the Sharingan yet—not as far as he knew; she could be secretive—he had no doubts that it would emerge, and in the meantime, her jutsu were some of the most creative in the village. She only had to see a jutsu a few times to memorize it, without the Sharingan, and the things she thought up were as unusual as they were effective. It wouldn't be long before both she and her brother would become Chuunin, and then Jounin. He had no doubt.

Lucia looked radiant. She was dressed in the local civilian fashions these days, with some embellishments, her dark hair gathered up behind her head and set with bejeweled combs. He had heard she was seeing somebody, very casually, very cautiously—a Shinobi from the Cloud who had come to Konoha as an emissary to the Hokage and had met Lucia in the streets. He had been struck by her, though he still didn't know the whole of who she was. Sasuke wondered where that would go. Wherever it went, he didn't begrudge her. It felt like a good thing.

His family crowded around the bed to see his daughter. Sasuke tilted the blanket wrapped bundle so they could see her face, showing her off.

"She's lovely," Lucia murmured. "As beautiful as Rina when she was a baby. Can I hold her?"

Sasuke nodded silently, overcome by the emotions coursing through him, and passed the baby to Lucia, though he did not want to let her go. Lucia held the child tenderly, as one who had had practice holding babies, and smiled into the infant's face as she swayed and rocked her. Rina was on her tiptoes, looking into her cousin's face with interest. Itachi stood just beside her, patient and calm as he always was. He looked more like Itachi Uchiha every day, physically, but Sasuke didn't think of his brother as much when he saw his nephew anymore. Their personalities had some similarities, but they were very different people. He was looking forward to seeing who Itachi grew up to be.

Sasuke looked at Sakura, into her shining, happy eyes. She looked even more overwhelmed than he felt. And Naruto, standing by the door with his arms crossed, could be described as nothing but smug.

Looking at them all, Sasuke realized…This was what his brother had intended. This was the future he had wished for Sasuke, had created for him.

He glanced out the window. A soft rain was falling, almost like a mist, coating everything in cool droplets. Itachi Uchiha had always liked the rain. It was a natural cleansing agent, uncomfortable at times, but from it new things would grow.

New things will grow , Sasuke thought, looking at his family with a mixture of pride and humility. *New things will grow.*

The End

Author's Notes:

This is probably my last fanfic. I am writing original work now and hope to publish original novels in the fantasy genre. Writing fanfic has been a fun diversion these past 15 years (wow, has it really been that long?) and has taught me a lot about writing. Thank you

for your reviews and encouragement—I couldn't have learned half so much without your thoughtful comments.

I would love your comments on the final chapter, but I don't expect them given how long I made everyone wait. If you do choose to review, thank you very much! I will surely be delighted. I read and reread reviews all the time.

Here are some answers to questions I anticipate:

When did Sasuke marry Sakura?

A few months after committing to be with her forever, but I don't make a big deal out of it and I don't think they did either.

Did Naruto marry Hinata?

Certainly, and likely with more fanfare.

Is Yukio x Rina a thing?

Yes, but only in my imagination right now. It would happen sometime in the future when Rina is around 16 and Yukio is around 18/19. This could be a whole story as it will be fraught with conflict due to the immaturity of the characters. I would love to write it, but if I do, it will probably be an original work set in an original universe.

Do either of Lucia's children get the Mangekyou Sharingan?

I think they lead happier lives than what would necessitate it, but possibly. They are both capable.

Is Sakura and Sasuke's child named Salad?

I guess so!

Does Lucia defeat the Higher Houses?

Yes, but it's a boring drawn out "business" story with lots of politics and financial deals and so on—not the story I wanted to tell here, and it will take most of her life. Suffice it to say that she gets justice for her parents' murder and scrubs out some, if not all, corruption in the land of her birth.

Does Lucia get remarried?

I don't know. I think she might. I say that she starts seeing someone in this final chapter, which shows that she is moving on and looking to be happy. I think Lucia is the type of person who will make the most out of whatever comes her way and feel blessed with what she has. Whether she marries again or not, she will live a rich life that is much happier than the life she has lived up until now.

Please leave any other questions you may have in reviews or PMs and I will try to answer them.